

**The English Examining Boards: Their route from independence to
government outsourcing agencies**

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Abstract

The contention of this thesis is that the independent English examining boards have been gradually transformed from independent organisations administering a national qualifications system to virtual outsourcing agencies working within a centrally controlled framework.

The thesis begins with a review of the literature of English education which reveals that within that literature the examining boards have remained peripheral bodies, accepted as an element in the secondary assessment structure but never seriously analysed. Within a theoretical framework based on the central concept of the encroaching “managerial state”, this absence has informed the methodology, which locates the university examining boards as the focus in a historical narrative of the development of the unique English post-16 qualifications providers.

The central section of the thesis concentrates on the examining boards in the 1990s, and suggests that the pressures of that decade threatened their stability. Data in support of the analysis of this section was gathered in a series of interviews with significant actors from the boards and their regulatory agencies. Then a section dealing with the A-level grades crisis of September 2002 suggests that this event provides clear evidence of the Boards’ loss of professional independence.

The thesis concludes that the English examining boards can no longer be deemed independent and ends with some observations on the significance of this change with two possible directions suggested for their future.

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Introduction : Unique Bodies Neglected by the Academy

In 1965, R J Montgomery observed that “...*it is surprising that the broad evolution of the large examinations system has not been considered more fully elsewhere*” (Montgomery 1965: ix) as he embarked on his own history of the English examinations system. Although a traditionally-minded historian rather than a radical sociologist, Montgomery also believed that “*Those controlling the examinations were...in an exceptionally powerful position in the education system.*” Yet forty years on, there has been no serious study of the unique English examining boards that for nearly 150 years have been administering that unconsidered system. This thesis begins the process of narrating the evolution of these bodies and evaluating the effects of the shifts in control which they have experienced over their long existence.

I contend that this is no mere exercise in abstract research. As I write, a heated debate about the reform of 14-19 education in England is in progress. My research provides fresh insights into the English awarding bodies which I believe can and should inform that process. I suggest that overlooking their professional expertise has proved costly in implementing the recent reform of A levels.

My thesis contends that the English examining boards can no longer be described as independent agents within the English qualifications system. The questions that have shaped my research in support of this thesis are:

1 How did the examining boards evolve from their origins accrediting university matriculation into independent providers of the national qualifications system?

2 How did the successive changes to the examinations structure affect their role?

3 What evidence is there of a shift in control from the examining boards to the state?

In deference to the view of a writer who suggests that “*all histories are motivated, whether they are grand narratives or small stories...*” (Simpson 2005: 25), I acknowledge that I have been motivated in this research by my view that these organisations merit scrutiny, central as they are to the qualifications structure which so profoundly affects the life chances of the nation’s young people.

My interest in the English examining boards can be traced back to the 1970s, when I began teaching in the English secondary system. My initial response was incredulity (the typical reaction of those who arrive from abroad) at the eccentricity of a national qualifications system provided by a group of independent and competing boards. This interest developed after I became a teacher representative on one examining board, progressing through a variety of roles for over twenty years. Research for a Master’s dissertation (Sturgis 2000) revealed the paucity of attention the Boards¹ had received from the academic community, and suggested the area as one worthy of further investigation.

During my long connection with one examining board, my views about the system were gradually altering from initial suspicion to a reluctant acknowledgement of its merits. At the same time I was aware of the increasing restrictions being imposed on the Board by central regulation. Eventually this gradual and almost surreptitious change presented a natural focus for my research. Had I been aware at the outset of the risks inherent in embarking on a doctoral thesis in such an under-researched field, I might have sought a more well-trodden path. Certainly during the course of my work

I have felt the absence of other research against which to locate my own. However, I have pursued my interest with a view to providing at least some insight into what I found to be an obscure corner of the educational world.

While education history may for the most part have overlooked the examining boards, education sociology is clear that there can be no question that examinations play a significant role in what Pierre Bourdieu described as the reproduction of cultural advantage. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) Sociologists from Durkheim to Bernstein have consistently identified the significant role of examinations – and, I infer, their providers – in determining the distribution of power in a society. Emil Durkheim noted in 1956 that in the nineteenth century, competitive examinations with rewarding consequences for those who succeeded became widespread in schools, thereby “*reinforcing the individualisation that has become characteristic of industrial society....*” (Quoted in Eggleston 1990: 57) In 1971, Basil Bernstein’s often-cited statement would also suggest a primary role in the social power structure for examination providers as assessors of public knowledge:

How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control.
(Bernstein 1971: 59)

Bourdieu, whom Bernstein in his study *Class, codes and control* described as “*the critical theorist*” (Bernstein 1990: 69), certainly included examinations as one of the mechanisms which facilitate the maintenance of cultural advantage. In fact his account of the objective of sociological analysis could well describe the objective of this study:

...de porter au jour les structures les plus profondément enfouis des différents mondes et aussi les mécanismes qui tendent à en assurer la reproduction ou la transformation.
(Bourdieu 1989: 7)

I believe that these sociologists' consensus on the significance of examinations supports my case for the importance of a study of the unique constellation of English examining boards as the providers of those examinations which carry such influence. Michael Young, in his 1971 reflections on the lack of sociological analysis of the curriculum, noted that the Boards – regularly accused of controlling the curriculum – had also been overlooked:

The 'guiding interests' of the examining boards have so far remained outside the field of sociological enquiry.
(Young 1971: 21)

I suggest that the neglect of the Boards in academic research is linked to that which Young identified regarding the curriculum:

Perhaps the organization of knowledge implicit in our own curricula is so much part of our taken-for-granted world that we are unable to conceive of alternatives.
(Young 1971: 40-41)

A similar passive acceptance of the examining boards, which were long perceived to control the secondary curriculum through their examination syllabuses, may have quenched academic inquiry into the whole area. Yet when, following James Callaghan's 1976 speech at Ruskin College, the curriculum became the focus of intense interest, that interest did not spill over to include the Boards. They continued to function outside any serious analysis.

Although unconsidered within the academy, they have featured increasingly in the nation's media. When an examination-related problem arises, as in January 2002, it is not only the Secretary of State for Education – “**Minister's fury at exam board's blunder in maths paper**” (*The Guardian*, 21 January 2002), but the Prime Minister – “**Blair slams 'sloppy' exam board error**” (*Evening Standard* 22, January 2002) – who join the accusing media chorus directed at the qualification providers. Many similar

episodes indicate that when a scapegoat is required for problems in the system, the Boards are very central indeed in the nation's consciousness. This could be interpreted as evidence that they are taken for granted until they make a mistake. Yet the nation's evident reliance on their performance makes their absence from serious analysis puzzling.

As well as being taken for granted, the Boards may have suffered from the low level of awareness of the exceptional nature of the English structure. In other countries, examinations are either an integral function of the state apparatus as in China and France – as well as Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland – or an aspect of teachers' professional repertoire as in Germany. The provision of national qualifications by independent and competing organisations has no duplicate internationally. The former chief executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) has acknowledged this, and said, "*I have regularly described our system as unique*" (QCA1, 2000). It is perhaps this unique nature of the English system that may have contributed to its neglect.

These findings firstly support my case for the value of a study of the English examining boards as providers of the examinations which wield undoubted influence. Secondly they have affected the methodology of the thesis. In place of an orthodox literature review, my first chapter is more a survey of a literature which reveals my subject to be at best a peripheral presence.

In the second chapter I establish the theoretical framework within which my research is located and the resulting methodological approach I have adopted.

With the study thus grounded, I provide evidence for my case in three central chapters. Chapter three uses historical data to narrate the development of the boards

until the end of the 1980s. Then chapter four focuses on the external and internal stresses the boards experienced during the 1990s, presenting supporting data from a series of interviews with principal actors from the Boards and their Regulators. For the purposes of this analysis I consider ‘the 1990s’ as stretching from 1988 to 2002, following the example of Eric Hobsbawn, who defines the 19th century as the period from 1789 to 1914 (Quoted by Jonathan Friedland in *The Guardian* 31 August 2005).

The fifth chapter turns to the only major crisis the boards have experienced: the dispute over A-level grades in September 2002, which I suggest was a direct result of the boards’ loss of professional control following the changes made during the 1990s.

A concluding chapter summarises the detailed conclusions of the study, with a brief section on the implications that my findings might suggest for the future of the English examining boards.

Chapter 1 Location of the Thesis in Relation to the Literature

Identifying an Absence: A survey of the literature reveals the Boards as peripheral

As I embarked on my research, I began with a search which revealed my subject to have remained virtually absent across the spectrum of education literature. In following up the usual paths of references cited in bibliographies, sifting through journals, interrogating electronic databases and discussing with other researchers, I succeeded in opening up the terrain but found my particular interest had been overlooked. While the process has fulfilled its purpose in training me in research skills, the results have been less than fruitful in shedding the light of other research on the examining boards. Therefore this section covers the range of literature I have consulted in acquiring a grasp of my field of inquiry, and serves to underline the need for the research I have carried out.

I began my search by reading general overviews of the terrain of English education. For example, when in the year 2000 James Tooley wrote his manifesto for a return to conservative values in education, he identified four authors as “*millennial*” thinkers in the field – although in my view their work tends toward the journalistic (Tooley 2000: 2). These individuals, evidently selected because in the late 1990s they shared Tooley’s assumption that there was a crisis in education, were:

- Michael Barber with *The Learning Game*
- Tom Bentley with *Learning Beyond the Classroom*
- Melanie Phillips with *All Must Have Prizes*

- George Walden with *We Should Know Better*

Such populist works on education – while providing a flavour of the live issues at a particular time – do not credit the Boards with the influence they have been popularly rumoured to exert. Not one of these commentators made any reference to the examining boards despite their stress on the importance of examinations in determining the life chances of young people.

Still with popular overviews of education, Stuart Maclure, editor of the journal *Education* from 1954 to 1969 and of *The Times Educational Supplement* from 1969 to 1989, has written a very readable insider's version of policy developments from the HMI perspective in *The Inspectors' Calling* (Maclure 2000). His account, using evidence provided by the personal accounts of some 200 members of the Inspectorate, throws light on rather murky episodes like the production of the unpublished *Yellow Book* prior to James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin speech. Yet in his account of "*the evolution of the education system in England and Wales in the second half of the twentieth century*" (Maclure 2000: vii), the Boards and their examinations, which in his role as *TES* editor he covered so regularly, do not feature.

More curiously still, the Boards have failed to interest academic analysts. Although their stock in trade is the finer points of assessment, the Boards do not feature in research into technical measurement. (See for example Goldstein and Heath 2000) Studies of the social (Lowe 1988) or administrative (Gosden 1983) history of education treat them as a given part of the landscape. Their absence, although surprising, I proffer as a principal justification for my research. Therefore it is essential to discuss in detail the search I have conducted of the literatures of the three disciplines at whose conjunction I had set out to locate this study.

The most fruitful by far was education history, and this has determined the focus of my thesis. Together with that history, the literature of assessment has clarified the technical issues which I believe have been an unacknowledged factor in the recent concerns over the Boards. Then policy papers and critiques of those policies have been of fundamental importance. My major disappointment was the discovery that education sociology has not seriously addressed the examinations system, still less its providers. Despite the signals of Bourdieu, Bernstein and Young referred to above, education sociologists regularly cite examination results as indicators of, for example, social exclusion, but I have not been able to find a significant body of work that has delved more deeply into the structures which produce them. This has been a disappointment and has meant that my planned triangulation of historical/political/sociological analysis has had to be adjusted and has instead become essentially a historical-political account.

1 The History of English Secondary Education and its Examinations

To create the necessary overview of the English examining boards, I needed to construct a historical framework which placed them within the development of English secondary education and its examinations, which they administered.

(a) Primary Sources

In researching that history, three early primary sources – the Taunton Report (Commission 1868), the Clarendon Report (Schools 1864) and the Bryce Report (Education 1895) – respectively provide valuable insight into Victorian thinking on

secondary education, the new notion of examinations and the role of the public schools.

The value of primary sources is particularly evident when they are written with the clarity and elegant prose of the 1911 Dyke Acland Report. This investigation into the plethora of university and professional examinations faced by young people recommended a system of national qualifications which resulted in the creation of the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate examinations. The report is admirably concise. With a transparent table of contents, it provides a clear rationale for its recommendations, and includes full transcripts of the evidence provided by the many witnesses whom the Committee heard. However, while these early reports have provided valuable insights into how the current system developed, they throw no light on the early years of the examining boards.

Unfortunately, as the century proceeded and the number of reports, circulars, green and white papers burgeoned, their language became increasingly influenced by the tendency to bland obscurity which now characterises official documents. Despite the greatly increased ease of printing and reproduction, today reports like that of Sir Ron Dearing in 1996 (Dearing 1996) merely list the organisations (rarely individuals) who gave evidence but provide not even the gist of their views, still less the entire transcript. As a result it has become increasingly difficult to gather anything more than a superficial impression of the thinking behind such sources.

Given such limitations, sources such as the Norwood Report (SSEC 1943), and the later series of qualification-related government reports and consultation papers such as *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES, Employment 1991), Dearing's *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* (Dearing 1996), *Guaranteeing*

Standards (DfEE 1997a), and *Qualifying for Success* (DfEE 1997b) have been invaluable for gaining an insight into the motivation behind the changes that were part of the qualifications culture of the 1990s. The examining boards feature only in the *Dearing Review* and in *Guaranteeing Standards*, but even here they are treated rather as a problem requiring a solution – in the latter case, merger – than as acknowledged pillars of the examinations system.

(b) Education Histories

The student of the history of education can begin to construct an analytical framework by reading some excellent secondary sources of which Green's *Education and State Formation* (Green 1990) is a fine example, from an essentially sociological standpoint. His placing of English developments within a European/American comparative model stresses the voluntarist nature of provision in this country. Green bestows on Margaret Archer the accolade of "*the most powerful comparative framework that has yet been provided*" (Green 1990:73) for her Weberian account of *The Social Origins of Educational Systems* (Archer 1984). With these works framing the field overall, one can locate the perspective of the limited number of accounts of the origins and early growth of the examining system.

Two historians have provided useful accounts of the development of examinations in England which are an essential resource in understanding how the curious structure of the English boards came into being. John Roach's *Public Examinations in England 1850-1900* (Roach 1971) is a social history which provides a nicely balanced contrast to Robert Montgomery's *Examinations and their Use as an Administrative Device in England* (Montgomery 1965). Montgomery's account is firmly based in a Cambridge viewpoint, and gives the flavour of the endless debates over trivial issues such as the

titles of the first qualification. Roach paints with a broader brush, and identifies the themes which formed a constant in early English education policy formation: the dominance of an Oxbridge-centred network of influential men, the hierarchy of class, the mistrust of state interference and the clash between the established Church and Dissent. Roach's account of the beginnings of English examinations was augmented by his authoritative narrative of the faltering development of the nation's secondary education in the 19th century (Roach 1986). Apart from these two accounts which touch on the emergence of the examining boards, they virtually disappear from view except for what could be termed 'insider' histories of particular Boards by their own loyal servants, who make no claim to objectivity.

The most useful of these is that produced by James Petch (Petch 1953). His *Fifty Years of Examining: The JMB from 1903 to 1953* is a first-hand and very personal account of one major Board's history written just at the point when the first tightening of the grip of central control was being felt. By contrast, H G Earnshaw's little booklet *The Associated Examining Board for the General Certificate of Education: Origin and History* (Earnshaw 1974) tends towards hagiography, but nonetheless does give an account of the early days of the only board to be created independent of a university. J L Brereton's 1944 *The Case for Examinations* (Brereton 1944) was presumably written as a contribution from the perspective of the Cambridge board to the debate that produced the 1944 Education Act. It may have been published too late (there is no indication as to the actual date of its publication in 1944) to affect the Act, passed in July of 1944. Certainly none of its ideas was incorporated in the Butler Act.

A recent edition in this category is AQA's *Setting the Standard* (AQA 2003c), published to mark "a century of public examining". Various contributors from AQA's

two parent Boards have called on their years of examining to provide an outline of the landmarks over the 100 years since the founding of the JMB and 50 years since the creation of the AEB – the organisations now merged as AQA

Once these resources have yielded their insights, the Boards' development must be traced through the terrain of histories of secondary education and its related qualifications, the area where they operated, albeit unacknowledged for the most part.

The pre-eminent figure in providing an overview of English educational history is Brian Simon – described posthumously as “*the leading and best known historian of education ever produced in this country*” (McCulloch 2004: 3). Simon combined the seemingly contradictory positions of a communist party member and a major figure within the ‘education establishment’. His passionate commitment to comprehensive education was the motivating force in his historical writing, which is based in the struggle played out between the forces of conservatism and the challenge of a growing socialist movement. Of particular value is his volume on the rarely considered years between the first and second world wars: *The Politics of Educational Reform 1920-1940* (Simon 1974). Simon makes it clear that it was the dominance of traditional views within the education department during this period that influenced the 1944 Education Act. However, his analysis touches only tangentially on developments within the field of examinations and not at all on the Boards that provide them. He seemed to see them as a given part of the terrain but by no means a principal factor in his concern with the wider issue of the structure of secondary education.

Harry Judge is another champion of the comprehensive school who has chronicled his practical experience in *A Generation of Schooling: English Secondary Schools since 1944* (Judge 1984). As a head teacher in Banbury he created an all-ability school from

the existing schools in the town. Judge's book provides much period detail to flesh out his account of the early days of comprehensive schools. A neighbour of both Anthony Crosland when Labour Secretary of State for Education and Angus Maude, a prominent Conservative, Judge moved in influential circles and noted the continuing influence on education policy of Oxford men like Crosland, Denis Healey and Tony Benn. Yet his wide-ranging study deals with the examining system in cryptic terms. He portrayed it as originally ensuring "*doctrines of a balanced curriculum and a broad, general education. It has, of course [1984], long ceased to do so*" (Judge 1984:102). No explanation is offered as to the reasons for the last statement.

The 1944 Education Act as a seminal period in English secondary education has continued for half a century to intrigue historians. Gary McCulloch has suggested that comparing the work of four fellow writers on the 1944 Education Act could serve as an object lesson in differing approaches to the same issue. Doing so proved to be an illuminating exercise in viewing the period from the differing standpoints of McCulloch himself (McCulloch 1994), Michael Barber (Barber 1994), Kevin Jeffreys (Jeffreys 1986), Brian Simon (Simon 1991) and Peter Gosden (Gosden 1983). Each writer constructs his own valid analysis of the influence on and effects of this critical development in English secondary education. However – although certainly providing an invaluable model for the student researcher – the exercise revealed that none of these analysts had dealt with the post-1944 complete restructuring of the examinations system in anything more than a fleeting manner.

Despite the absence of the Boards from these accounts, it is of course through overlaying the approach of different writers on this post-war period that one builds the necessary multi-faceted understanding of the people and issues that shaped

developments. The meticulous research of Peter Gosden, an authority on Sir William Alexander and the Association of Education Committees, has provided an authoritative and non-partisan account of the administrative complexities of creating a new secondary system (Gosden 1976). One might expect that his serving for some time as Chairman of the Joint Matriculation Board might have led him to include some insights into that Board's view of the process, but not so.

Roy Lowe, the social historian of mid-20th century education as was Roach of the 19th, has written of the social issues surrounding the changes brought about by the 1944 Act (Lowe 1988). Despite the acknowledged social influence of examinations, the Boards and their work do not feature in his analysis. Then from the right of the political spectrum comes Corelli Barnett's censorious analysis of the post-war "*ragbag of politicians and civil servants, almost all of them Oxbridge humanists*" whose idealistic preoccupations he labelled "*the new Jerusalem*". (Barnett 1986: passim) He blamed their lofty notions of education for their failure to consider the needs of industry following the war. For him, the 1944 Act was a disaster in ignoring the importance of technical expertise. Yet he did not follow the logic of his position to engage in a discussion of the qualifications available to the new schools structure, still less to consider their providers.

Finally, a millennial volume edited by Richard Aldrich recruited the expertise of academics from around the country to look back on *A Century of Education* (Aldrich 2002). Alison Wolf's admirably clear and lively chapter on 'Qualifications and assessment' provides a concise overview of this field, and benefits from her wealth of research both in Britain and internationally. Professor Wolf has a foot in both the

historical and assessment camps, but it is within the latter that her expertise is most relevant to this study.

2 Assessment as the focus

Although the Boards may not have been the subject of academic attention, their central activity certainly has. Researchers began to focus on assessment issues in the early 1980s, when the growth of comprehensive schools meant increasing pressure for a more egalitarian examination system. A major contributor to this developing body of research literature in England was Desmond Nuttall, who seemed to be alone in genuinely grasping the issues involved in the debates around norm and criterion referencing in assessment. The pamphlet he wrote with Lea Orr in 1983 (Orr and Nuttall 1983) provided a clear exposition of the inevitable interconnection of the two approaches, and his article ‘Doomsday or a New Dawn?’ (Nuttall 1984) was a balanced analysis of the potential and pitfalls of the single 16+ examination. Perhaps the fact that it was published by the moribund Schools Council explains its failure to penetrate the collective understanding; had it been more widely understood, the annual outcry about examinations standards might have been mitigated.

A decade after Orr and Nuttall, Alison Wolf’s occasional paper for the Further Education Unit ably demonstrates the flaws in expecting criterion-referenced assessment to avoid the need for assessors to exercise judgement (Wolf 1993). Addressing the technical aspects of ensuring fair assessment, Professor Harvey Goldstein’s work on multi-level modelling in assessment is recognised internationally. His approach stimulates thinking about the theory behind assessment but – apart from the volume cited above – is not for the faintly numerate.

An accessible but comprehensive analysis of the issues to be considered in constructing a theory of educational assessment is Caroline Gipps' *Beyond Testing: Towards a Theory of Educational Assessment* (Gipps 1994). This clear exposition of the complexities of issues like reliability, validity and the criterion/norm referencing debate should be required reading for policy makers and regulators who are tempted to meddle with the system.

Contributing significantly to illuminating the technical aspects of assessment are the journals:

- *Assessment in Education*
- *Research Papers in Education*

A useful insight into one aspect of assessment is provided in Margaret Mathieson's article in the *Oxford Review of Education*. She presents a close scrutiny of the series of failed attempts to reform the A-level examinations and predicts – correctly, as it happens – that using 'core skills' to bridge the academic/vocational divide would end in yet another failure (Mathieson 1992).

A more general consideration of assessment related to the maintaining of standards in the final decade of the 20th century is provided by the contributors to *Educational Standards* (Goldstein 2000). In a variation on the usual format of the edited volume, the role and function of examinations and the definition of standards is discussed in four papers, to each of which another expert in the field writes a response. Their theme is the problematic nature of British attempts to maintain standards over time while leaning toward criterion referencing rather than the more internationally

accepted normative assessment. Astute and stimulating, these papers do address some of the ideological issues underlying assessment.

3 Education Policy and its Critiques

The stream of policy papers emerging from the education department, together with various reports, has been a major source for this research. The 1991 White Paper (DES 1991), the 1996 Dearing Report (Dearing 1996) and the 1997 consultation on the awarding bodies (DfEE 1997a) were, of course of fundamental importance in understanding the changes to post-16 education and the examining boards during the 1990s. Critiques on these policy papers have come from analysts working broadly in the field of post-16 education and qualifications. The work of Michael Young, initially as an individual (Young 1971) then as a mentor for researchers within the Post-16 Centre at the Institute of Education (See for example Spours, Young 1998), has provided an informed critique of post-16 education for the last quarter of the 20th century. In such critiques, the edited volume can provide an overview of a subject with a range of expertise from particular fields. Such a volume is the analysis of the recommendations of the Dearing Report edited by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours (Hodgson and Spours 1997). From their position as advocates of a modular qualifications framework rather than the three parallel tracks espoused by the 1996 Dearing Report, their contributors are firmly grounded in the field and provide valuable detail for the researcher. The issues they address are those that preoccupied teachers in schools and colleges in 1997. Later research by the same team into *New Labour's Educational Agenda* (Hodgson and Spours 1999) and then into how institutions were responding to the reforms introduced by *Curriculum 2000* (Hodgson and Spours 2003) have offered a critique of developing policy. A recent sign that new researchers may be starting to investigate the effects of policy on the examining

system is detected in William Blacklock's 2003 doctoral thesis (Blacklock 2003). His work on the theory of examination regulation, using QCA as a case study, provides invaluable insights into the phenomenon of the increasing number of such quasi-independent "*Non-departmental bodies*" and the centralising influence they wield.

4 The Social Impact of Examinations

As I indicated above, education sociologists have shown a growing interest in the social effects of examinations, if not in the organisations that provide them. In my quest for a sociological perspective, I consulted firstly what Richard Pring rated as the four leading educational journals: (Pring 1998)

- *The British Journal of Educational Studies* (co-edited by Pring and David Halpin)
- *The Oxford Review of Education*;
- *The British Journal of the Sociology of Education*;
- *The British Educational Research Journal*

Of the qualitative studies, by far the majority in these journals, some focus on the growing power of examinations over young people's life chances. They address issues of access and the opening of higher education to a wider range of students. With more attention devoted to primary education and national curriculum testing, I found disappointingly little on examinations *per se* and nothing on the examining boards. The article by Mathieson cited above was an exception, but was not a sociological study.

A rare focus on the role of the examining boards is that of Geoff Whitty in his 1985 post-Bernstein/Young work on the sociology of education. Devoting a full chapter to ‘The politics of public examinations’, he castigates the Boards as undermining the experimental Mode 3 syllabuses teachers were devising (Whitty 1985). While in my view his analysis does not acknowledge the Boards’ responsibility for assuring the reliability of the qualifications they accredited, it is a welcome recognition of their influence. However, more recent sociology has not followed his example. Even Whitty’s own later writing moved into more general policy analysis (Whitty 2002) which, while presenting an important broad critique, does not apply the methods of sociological analysis to the examinations system and its providers.

I shall cite the work of David Gillborn as representing the mainstream of educational sociology. He has produced a major body of research into *Exclusions from School* (1996), *Educational inequality* (2000), *Inclusive schooling* (2001) and *Education and institutional racism* (2002) which consistently cites examination results as indicators. For example, in the book *Rationing education policy, practice, reform and equity*, written with Deborah Youdell, they coined the phrase “*the A-C economy*” to describe how the use of GCSE grades brought about the exclusion from educational opportunity of many young people because of their social circumstances (Gillborn and Youdell 2000: 12). Defining themselves as reflexive researchers writing from the standpoint of critical theory, their analysis uses public examinations as markers of success and failure within the education system (Gillborn 2000: 4) but does not delve beneath those data to reflect on the role of the Boards in the process.

Another volume with contributions from a group of education sociologists at the Institute of Education – *Education in deprived areas: outcomes, inputs and processes*

(Power, Simon 2002) – similarly uses the attainment of five GCSE grades at C or above as an indicator but none of the authors addresses the power of the bodies providing these data.

As I said above, my search of the literature of educational sociology has meant that I have had to reconsider my original structure, and construct what is essentially a historical/political account.

5 Additional sources

(a) The Boards' Own Research: A hidden resource

Often with little recognition in the research community, the researchers employed by the examining boards have long been producing a stream of papers investigating both technical and social aspects of assessment. While some of their work has reached the public forum through presentations at national and international conferences, much has been restricted because of issues of confidentiality or commercial sensitivity.

In recent years Board trustees have relaxed to some extent their definition of sensitivity and more of this work is becoming accessible. For example, a research paper on A-level standards produced confidentially for the Associated Examining Board's Research Committee was eventually published in Ted Wragg's journal *Research Papers in Education* as the article 'Would the *real* gold standard please step forward?' (Baird, Cresswell 2000).

Two Boards have now produced summaries of such research. The first is Robert Wood's 1991 survey of research commissioned by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (Wood 1991). A collection of abstracts from papers produced by the Associated Examining Board's Research and Statistics Group was published in

2000 (Cresswell 2000) prior to their merger with the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board to form the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA). Such research has been most helpful in clarifying my grasp of technical issues like norm/criterion referencing (Cresswell 1997) or comparability of qualifications (Jones 2000) and provides important insights into the complexities of the assessment process. This study has benefited from access to these papers, both those now generally accessible and to those whose circulation was limited to members of the AQA Research Committee, of which I was for some years a member.

(b) The Media as Data Sources: Press, Broadcast and Internet

In view of both the lack of data on my subject in the range of academic sources and my focus on very recent events, I have relied on media sources more than might usually be advisable for serious research. The weekly coverage of the education scene in the *Times Educational Supplement* and *Guardian Education* have been invaluable in providing an overview of the field and of the succession of reports which have informed my research – pointing out sites on the internet which provide greater detail on topics they cover in broad terms. I am indebted to my supervisor for access to his copy of the weighty publication containing media coverage of the autumn 2002 A-level grades crisis (QCA 2002b). Comprising copies of articles collected by QCA staff from a wide variety of national and regional newspapers and the BBC website, it was circulated to selected members of the Authority. It has proved an invaluable source of data regarding that interesting time.

Occasional radio and television broadcasts have also provided information I have found useful in illuminating aspects of this territory.

(c) Confidential Papers from AQA

Finally, in my role as a Trustee of the Associated Examining Board (until March 2000) and then of the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (until March 2003), I have had access to papers issued under confidential cover. These have been of particular help with aspects of the financial pressures on that Board, which I identify as a very significant factor leading to the crisis over results in September 2002.

I want now to take a long look at the English examining boards and bring them from the periphery of academic enquiry where they have so long existed to the central focus of this study – and to locate them as an essential factor in the English system.

This survey of the literatures where the examining boards might have featured but did not has determined the thesis methodology. If the current situation of the examining boards is to be the focus of my analysis, I must begin by establishing how they reached that situation.

Chapter 2 Finding a theoretical framework, and constructing a methodology

Researching a subject whose terrain variously involves education history, policy, technical aspects of assessment and sociological impact has complicated the process of finding a relevant perspective. On the other hand, I have found it intellectually rewarding to explore a wide range of thinkers – and certainly the most broadening aspect of my research.

A guiding principle has been a variation on Scott and Usher's warning that "...those who carry out educational research need to realise that they are not engaging in a neutral activity but rather in a politics of knowing and being known where power is never absent" (Scott and Usher 1996:180). While, like virtually all such handbooks on education research, they were referring broadly to research into education practice, there is no question that power and its movement is at the centre of this research. A second and reassuring statement they make is that "Educational research is embedded within disparate discourses and traditions; hence there is no single correct practice and no superordinate methodology" (Scott 1996:178). What is important is that the researcher takes a clear position from which to construct an appropriate methodology.

1 Finding a conceptual perspective

I had expected to construct the theoretical framework for this study on a tripartite basis in three related disciplines: a need for analysis of this subject is identified by education sociologists; its initial boundaries are grounded in education history and its central focus is on the effects of education policy upon the bodies providing examination assessment. Despite my findings of the limited attention education

sociology has devoted to my subject, sociology has contributed to my theoretical framework.

The sociological terrain

As McCulloch and Richardson point out, it is especially French thinkers, like Durkheim, Althusser, Bourdieu and Foucault who have emphasized “the *social relationships within education and how these are in a dynamic with changing contemporary concerns*” (McCulloch and Richardson 2000: 55). One can extrapolate from the work of any or all of those thinkers that those who control examinations hold significant power in a society. It therefore follows that the examining boards who have long held that power in England merit close study. The examining boards could be included as among Althusser’s “*‘ideological state apparatuses’ designed...to perpetuate...cultural domination’*.” (Quoted in McCulloch 2000: 55) Michel Foucault would undoubtedly place the English boards among the “*‘capillary’ levels of the body politic*” which perpetuate the humanist discourse (Windschuttle 1996: 139,141). As cited above, Pierre Bourdieu, included examinations as instrumental in the reproduction of cultural advantage.

The English examining boards can therefore be included as one of the mechanisms involved in the reproduction of cultural advantage. The providers of academic qualifications are themselves, like teachers, successful products of the society’s education system and are assigned the role of measuring and duplicating the standards which reproduce their cultural advantage. In fact, Bourdieu’s reference to “*the examiners*” being “*generally obliged*” to maintain standards of linguistic manipulation that advantage the higher social classes (Bourdieu 1977: 73) could perhaps be said to cast the English examining boards as the bankers of scholastic capital.

Therefore, the sociological influence in this research is the endeavour to analyse one fundamental component of the structure of the English education system's "*processes of transmission and acquisition*" (Bernstein 1996:5) and the shift in power from the 'capillary level' to central control.

Seeking a historical position: entering the historiographical debate

With sociology having established the power function of the examining boards, their development within English educational history must be located if their current position is to be effectively analysed. This aspect of the research project comes within what McCulloch and Richardson designate as "*a contextualising study before focusing in depth on a contemporary problem*" (McCulloch 2000: 128). However, seeking a theoretical position within education history means that one must venture into what Richard Aldrich has described as "*a contested and changing terrain*" (Aldrich 2000a: 63). Aldrich's description is more than justified; history in general and education history in particular have been the scene of a serious theoretical debate. I was fortunate in that, as I struggled to grasp the issues of that debate, Roy Lowe published his 4-volume *History of Education: Major themes* (Lowe 2000). This collection of selections from the work of the principal participants in the historiographical wars proved invaluable in elucidating the issues at stake, and inform the following summary which I include as background to my decisions about a theoretical framework.

Following the spread of compulsory schooling in 19th-century western nations, the study of education history was confined to teacher training institutions. In both North America and Britain the subject formed an essential component in the preparation of teachers for their role in the upward climb of society, as elucidated in the whiggish

views of writers such as the American Ellwood Patterson Cubberley. Then in the last quarter of the 20th century, teacher training in specialist colleges evolved into teacher education within universities. Once opened to the wider intellectual community, education history attracted severe criticism.

In America, Bernard Bailyn attacked – in elegant but devastating prose – the work of earlier education historians as tainted with “*presentism*”, which he defined as “*seeing the past as the present writ small*” (Bailyn, 1960 quoted in Lowe 2000: vol 1, 3). Bailyn’s moderate revisionism was followed by Michael Katz’s radical critique, focused on the flawed analysis of high school attendance in 19th-century Boston, which omitted to mention “*the non-presence of rural pupils or urban immigrants...at high schools paid for by taxes on all*” (Katz 1970: 31). In England, Harold Silver articulated similar concerns with education historiography:

...the great majority of what had been written about popular education in the Victorian period offered few or no real clues as to relationships in schools.... The canon of published literature...recognized only limited areas of 'education' as being suitable for investigation.
(Silver 1977: 198)

There had been no development of a theoretical position to justify a particular focus. This is no longer acceptable within serious scholarship. Two decades on, the debate had cooled to the point where Carl F Kaestle was able to contend that most historians’ involvement with theory was not as producers but as users, ranging in type from the systematic through the eclectic to the incidental or heuristic. (Kaestle 1992: 116) Nevertheless, the criticisms have tainted the reputation of much early education history, relegating it to the status of a ‘field of study’ rather than a fully-fledged discipline.

This dismissive attitude is stoutly challenged by Richard Aldrich (Aldrich 2000b) and acknowledged by Gary McCulloch. (McCulloch 2000) The latter advocates returning to what he terms the ‘public past’ as exemplified by R H Tawney’s many contributions in the *Manchester Guardian*, in place of the ‘official past’ as presented in reports from Hadow to Crowther, and the ‘private past’ in the form of school-day memories as summoned up by James Callaghan, Kenneth Baker and Margaret Thatcher among others. In his 1994 analysis of the legacy of the 1944 Education Act, McCulloch also defended education history against other critiques:

Sometimes, it appears that...history is despised or overshadowed because it represents the ‘problem; whereas the future represents the ‘solution’. In these circumstances, it is especially crucial to develop a greater awareness of the relevance of the historical dimension in understanding contemporary dilemmas. (McCulloch 1994: 3)

In a more recent work, he sees the role of the education historian as communicating to “*the public domain at large*”, and providing “*independent and informed critiques which will challenge received orthodoxies and stimulate debate*” (McCulloch 2000: 16). This last position is the one this study has attempted to adopt. McCulloch does not see such analyses as neutral:

To view such processes at work must raise worrying questions about the detachment of even the most refined historical scholarship. But it underlines the importance of acknowledging and grappling with the importance of history in education policy; for if we do not, its influence, unremarked, will be insidious and unchallenged. (McCulloch 1994: 68)

In attempting to establish the public past of the examining boards, it will be useful to bear in mind the advice of two historians who have adopted the very public medium of television history. David Cannadine, echoing Bernard Bailyn’s earlier critique, warned against “*temporal parochialism*” and the notion that “*the only time is now*” (Cannadine 2002). Simon Schama defended “*the unfolding of a story*” as the appropriate method of presenting history – as opposed to Will Hutton’s preference for

what Schama termed the “*in the meantime philosophy of narration*”(Schama 2002). I recognise that in terms of current academic research, the term ‘narrative’ is frequently used to dismiss work that is deemed insufficiently analytical. The risk as described by Herbert Butterfield in his classic volume *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Quoted in Collini 2005: 24) is falling prey to “*the elisions and superficialities of narrative or synoptic history.*” There also lurk the perils of what in *The Guardian* of 11 July 2005 Tristram Hunt described as “*the terrible consequences of state-sanctioned national narratives – with their attendant myths of victimhood, ethnic cohesion or divine mission....*” Having considered this litany of warnings, I remain convinced, with McCulloch, “*of the relevance of the historical dimension*” in a study such as this. I hope to avoid as far as possible the various perils and present a story that has not been told while at the same time attempting to maintain a critical distance. My view has been endorsed more recently by Eric Hobsbawm, the pre-eminent Marxist historian: “*History needs to be defended against those who deny its capacity to help us understand the world....*” (*The Guardian* 15 January 2002)

In order to structure the narrative effectively, it will be constructed in accord with Antonio Gramsci’s concept – admittedly created in a mega dialectical context – of “*periods of organic crisis*” (Gramsci 1957: 174). The crises I shall be considering are not endogenous, but the result of external policy, the third aspect of the theoretical framework.

Focus on policy analysis: engaging with the “*managerial state*”

Within the broad spectrum of education policy analysis, while developing a historical narrative to compensate for lacunae in the literature, the shape of that narrative will be

structured around the policy shifts which altered the balance in control of the examining boards. This will involve an analysis based on the third element of this theoretical framework: policy formation. Once again, this is complex territory, involving the “*messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism*” that characterise education policy in the UK (Ball 1990: 9).

From their origins as independent bodies devised in the 19th century to regularise the selection process for universities, the examining boards have experienced a series of policy changes that materially affected them as organisations: a process described by one writer as “*the progressive nationalization of assessment and examination policy*” (Wolf 2002a: 221). Using the policy changes as the fundamental structuring mechanism of the study provides a lens through which to examine the process as it gathered momentum. However, as with education history, education policy analysis is a contested area.

In a seminar at the Institute of Education focussed on researching policy, Ann Hodgson spoke of the difficulty of understanding “*how education policy is created, enacted and implemented and where power and influence reside.*” (IoE, 29 November, 2001) The tri-partite balance between government, Local Education Authorities and teachers has long gone. Yet the expansion of educational quangos, increased autonomy for providers within an education market, devolution in Scotland and Wales and a “*veritable flood of different types of policy documents*” clouds the policy-making process. (Hodgson 2003: 6)

It has been the case that writers avoid the issue through the use of terms like ‘the educational establishment’ which has frequently served as a form of shorthand to

describe the various groups or individuals who influence English educational policy. In attempting to be more specific, Stephen Ball's concept of what he terms "*the educational state*" is helpful: "*the conglomeration of sites and agencies concerned with the regulation of the education system*" which "*contain and represent contesting interests in policy formation and policy debate*" (Ball 1990: 20). This definition enables an examination of strands of influence which can be more precise than the currently popular, but undefined, term 'policy makers'. In fact, Ball specifically includes examining boards as one of the agencies which form a part of the educational state: "*some system regulation and system management in education are actually carried out by quangos, appointed bodies, intermediary agencies and even, in the case of examinations, by quasi-commercial organisations*" (Ball 1990: 20). This thesis will challenge Ball's implication that the boards are agencies which regulate the system: in fact quite the reverse. They are now recipients of regulation rather than actors in its formation despite their undoubted role within the "*educational state*".

I have found that the most apt conceptual framework for the power shift from agencies within the "*education state*" to central control is Clarke and Newman's notion of "*the managerial state*". (Clarke and Newman 1997) Their purpose is to explore:

...a range of structural and institutional realignments: the introduction of markets, the rise of contracting, the changing balance of power between central government and local and regional agencies of governance....
(Clarke 1997: ix)

While Clarke and Newman are concerned principally with changes in policy which affect the welfare state and in particular the National Health Service, I believe their approach is equally appropriate for considering the series of changes to the relationship between central agencies and the examining boards. In their case, the

“changing relationships mediated through structural and institutional realignments” have certainly involved shifts in power “between ‘old’ professionals and administrators and ‘new’ managerial *roles*” (Clarke 1997: xiii) at the centre.

Their concept of the “*managerial state*” is congruent with Anthony Sampson’s meta-analysis of the changed role of members of parliament who formulate the policies which drive that state. Returning forty years after writing his *Anatomy of Britain* to discover whether and how power had altered, Sampson documents a major shift from amateurism: “*Forty years ago most members [of parliament] saw [politics] as only part of their activity*” – to professionalism: “*In the twenty-first century nearly all MPs are full-time politicians who have left their previous jobs*” (Sampson 2004:8, 10). It follows that professional politicians are predisposed to be highly involved in the detail of policy-making, quite the reverse of their Victorian predecessors who abhorred direct involvement. Sampson’s argument is that their closed existence within the ‘Westminster Village’ keeps them less aware of the views of ordinary electors than they once were. I propose that another result of their full personal investment in a political career is that politicians are now more than ever keen to make a clear difference in whatever field they hold office. Change is therefore accelerated, as time is more than ever of the essence. The change imposed on the examining boards provide a classic example of how political influence on such change can have unintended consequences. In their case, I contend that increasing regulation which weakened their professional autonomy led to a crisis in September 2002.

With this theoretical position framing my research, I turn to the methodological structure which will attempt to answer my research questions and support my thesis.

2 Constructing a methodology

The basic methodology is a qualitative one. In attempting to support the thesis that the English examining boards are no longer independent agents within the English qualifications system, I have investigated the following questions:

1 How did the examining boards evolve from their origins accrediting university matriculation into independent providers of the unique national qualifications system?

2 How did the successive changes to the examinations structure affect their role?

3 Is there evidence of a shift in control from the Boards to the State?

In using the adjective ‘independent’ to describe the examining boards, I should explain that I have interpreted a variety of functions as indicators of independence. The original function was a Board’s professional freedom to design syllabuses and the examinations which assess them. However, I have also used the term in relation to administrative independence as regards organisational structures and financial independence regarding examination fees.

The above questions are answered through empirical data gathered from:

- A variety of written sources from academic articles and historical accounts to policy papers and reports, with more use of the media than is customary;
- A series of interviews with “*key actors, participants in the policy process*” (Ball 1990: 2).

Written sources to locate the examining boards

A historical narrative, periodised by the major changes experienced by the Boards, locates them as organisations within the English secondary education system and identifies some of the deeply embedded social and political strands which lie behind those changes. The underlying issue is that of control: identifying the shifts that occurred almost surreptitiously.

The first historical section follows the relatively late development of a secondary education system in England and documents the origins of the examinations which developed to accredit the products of that system and to select them for higher education.

The next period focuses on the major changes to both the secondary system and the examinations structure resulting from the 1944 Education Act, which with relatively little further change, continued until the last decade of the 20th century which, as stated above, I treat as the period from 1988 to 2002.

The sources of the data for these sections are principally the education histories mentioned above, as well as the various official reports and government circulars which detailed the policies and the regulations which would enact them.

Because the focus of a significant body of the research is on very recent events, I have frequently had to rely on media sources. The *Times Educational Supplement* has often proved to be the only source which reports on attitudes within the educational world to the various events I have been researching. I recognise that this is a definite

limitation which I have attempted to counterbalance through the use of interviews with participants in those events.

When moving to the central analysis of the major changes experienced by the examining boards during the 1990s, one has as a major resource the considerable number of reports and white papers produced during that decade. Once again, however, despite the central focus on post-16 qualifications and the bodies that award them in that literature, very little of their content addresses the boards directly. An advantage I had as an ‘insider’, a role whose other implications are discussed below, was access to confidential papers of the examining board of which I was a trustee. I have requested and received permission to use any data derived from those papers. On rare occasions I have used my own diaries to verify dates or issues discussed.

Interviews with major actors

The other principal source of my empirical data was a series of interviews. Because this phase of my research closely approximates what Yin describes as investigating “*a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context*” (Yin 1994:13), other tenets of Yin’s approach to case study seemed appropriate in constructing this aspect of my study. Certainly his injunction that “*You should bring your own prior expert knowledge...*” (Yin 1994:123) seemed to apply to this study, where my prior knowledge of the field was an important factor. For contextualising some aspects of the changes in post-16 education, I would be drawing on my experience as a teacher living through the events I was considering. In designing the interview schedule (See Appendix for a list of the interviews), I would be relying on my active involvement

as an examining board trustee in order to gain access to what has always been an area concealed behind the confidential nature of the examining business.

Gewirtz and Ozga acknowledge a similar advantage: “*Access was considerably eased by the fact that one of us has worked closely with a former Deputy Permanent secretary, who was invaluable in directing us to his colleagues and friends, and who gained their co-operation by describing us as ‘perfectly harmless’*” (Gewirtz and Ozgan 1994: 193). Geoffrey Walford, in his editorial ‘Reflections on researching the powerful’ suggests that:

It would seem that access is more likely to be granted if the researchers appear to be... ‘perfectly harmless’. In our sexist society, where it is men who hold most of the powerful positions, female researchers may be at an advantage in being perceived as being ‘harmless’, especially if they are young and not in senior positions within their own organizations.
(Walford 1994: 223)

In my case, although not young and having been in a relatively influential position, I believe I was seen not as “*harmless*” but as trustworthy because I was known to most of the individuals I was interviewing. This was I think not ‘a’ but ‘the’ essential advantage in my gaining access. The fact that my interviews were in the interest of academic research rather than, for example, journalism, was also a factor in facilitating access to a publicity-shy segment of the educational world.

In explaining the methodology of this research, it is important to make clear the potential hazards inherent in my dual role as a researcher on the outside seeking data, and an insider who gains access to that data because of a privileged position. The methodological concerns one faces were described by Susan Semel:

...Writing the history of a school in which one has been so intimately involved poses significant methodological concerns.
I am cognizant that many of the problems of participant observation...are applicable to my research.

...*The problem of 'going native' presented an interesting dilemma.* (Semel 1994: 208)

Certainly my position was not one of a participant observer – a sort of examining board ethnographer whose account could be described as “*subjective, biased, impressionistic [and] idiomatic*” (Cohen and Manion 1994: 110) Yet my approach is too linear to conform to post-structuralist preferences for “*the particularity of historical experience, the material hereeness and nowness...*” (Quoted in Windschuttle 1996: 102) where subjectivity is assumed. Instead, I have seen my role as a variation on the Lévi-Strauss notion of a *bricoleuse*: “*a constructivist who interrogates the materials...to discover what each could signify*” (Crotty 1998: 50). I have tried to assume the role not of ‘critical friend’ but of dispassionate interpreter of the examining boards. I recognise that at times this role may appear to verge on advocacy, but I have made every effort to avoid slipping over that line. Also, although from the outside I might appear to fit the pattern of ‘insider’, within the Board my position as a teachers’ union nominee meant that my allegiance was not viewed as an unquestioning one.

I believe that, with my status clarified, this dual role has been a strength in both my grasp of the issues I have been analysing and my ability to access material normally not open to public scrutiny. Certainly, as I said above, my being known to nearly all the individuals I approached for interviews enabled me to gain access to people who do not normally speak openly. In 1981, Michael F D Young commented that: “*It is not without significance that the dominant tradition of educational research has never conceived of investigations into the practice of the powerful*” (Young 1981: 38). Since that date, a growing body of qualitative research theory addresses the importance of such interviews and considers aspects of their design which have influenced my

planning. In relation to this study, much of the data which interested me could be uncovered only through such interviews. The major English work for students of educational research methodology advises that:

...the more one wishes to acquire unique, non-standardised, personalised information about how individuals view the world, the more one veers toward qualitative, open-ended unstructured interviewing.

(Cohen, Manion 2000)

While the insights of the powerful are significant, Stephen Ball points out pitfalls in what he describes as “élite interviews”: “*interviewees do not produce simple, guileless descriptions of events; they are sophisticated interpreters of events*” (Ball 1994: 112). A related warning of Ball’s, considered by Ecclestone when assessing her interview data, is the risk of accepting individuals’ justifications of policy as “*simple realism*” (Quoted in Ecclestone 2002: 175). My approach to avoiding that pitfall was to interrogate the accounts of the same issues as provided by a number of individuals in order to identify common strands.

Certainly it is no guileless description that I was seeking. On the contrary, it is the sophisticated interpretation which can, I believe, throw an informed light on issues which have remained in obscurity because of the inherent caution and the culture of confidentiality which have always formed part of the examining boards’ culture. My reading of the literature around the major changes to the examinations structure in 1911, 1944 and 1986 revealed that what was written about those changes had been based for the most part on documents, without the insight that informed participants can provide. I strongly believed that the perceptions of those most directly involved could provide invaluable evidence not generally available. To obtain the best data from such interviews, Maurice Kogan, whose early experience co-writing a book with Edward Boyle and Anthony Crosland lends credibility to his advice, suggests that:

It is in the nature of political or organisational studies that interlocutors with distinguished records and minds of their own are not likely to accept too much control over the questions they answer. Indeed it is precisely because one wants to capture their individual construction of events and relationships that it often proves best to explain what one is after and let them structure the answer.

(Kogan 1994: 91)

In more recent research, Kathryn Ecclestone carried out 25 interviews with major actors in her study of Learning Autonomy in Post-16 Education. Her objective was to analyse the policy debates around outcome-based assessment models. Certain of the advantages she cited from Walford's *Researching the Powerful in Education* which apply to her case study can apply equally to the interviews planned for this research:

It enables researchers to 'people policy' with personalities, beliefs, values and dilemmas, gain data unavailable elsewhere, confirm or adjust publicly available accounts of policy and identify networks of individuals and agencies.

(Quoted in Ecclestone 2002:47)

These experienced researchers established the value of interviewing major actors and their advice determined the design of the interviews. They would be unstructured and open ended so as to allow the subjects to speak freely.

My definition of a 'major actor' in relation to an examining board was its Chief Executive; in relation to the regulatory body, the highest-ranking civil servants involved in regulating qualifications; from the education department the individual responsible for secondary qualifications. These were the people who had participated in the discussions which interested me. I maintain that the limited sample of my interviewees is balanced by the valuable insights they can provide into what Ecclestone described as the "*organisational and normative perspectives swirling around debates in assessment...alongside some acculturation into unfamiliar organisational cultures*" (Ecclestone 2002: 174) which researchers need if they are to acquire a genuine grasp on the complexities of the policy process.

Weighing the risks of a limited sample of interviewees

I acknowledge that relying so heavily on interviews for my data risks an imbalance in the data so obtained. The risk is further heightened by the limited sample of individuals who fit my criteria of ‘élite’ figures within the examining world. From each of what had been reduced to just three awarding bodies, I planned to interview only the individual who had been Chief Executive during the 1990s. From the regulatory bodies, I planned to interview only the individual who had led the academic qualifications section throughout the 1990s and one who had been instrumental in the vocational section during the creation of GNVQs. My plan to complete the triangulation by interviewing the individual who had been in the dominant role related to qualifications within the Department for Education and Skills as it had become, was thwarted by the movement of civil servants into different areas of responsibility and their resulting unwillingness to speak about their past roles. There may also have been a degree of reluctance due to the established confidential status of civil servants.

Nevertheless I decided to proceed with my plan. I took the view that in no other way could I acquire a range of data on the issues I was investigating. My search of the literature had confirmed that to date the examining boards had avoided close analysis. If this closed world were to be investigated, I was convinced that it was essential to begin the process – which I hope others will continue – by speaking to those most intimately involved during the period I was investigating.

For two reasons, I did not attempt to interview a wider range of individuals. The principal one was that I believe the genuine insights I was seeking would come only from those involved at the highest level of the relevant bodies. Previous experience of data collection from various levels within one organisation (Sturgis 2000) had produced limited data, and responses determined largely by the skill with which the questionnaire prompts had been constructed. The second was that I wanted to have the opportunity of collecting data which involved the variety of significant actors' perceptions, generalisations and uncertainties in order to discern patterns and relationships – or the lack of them, and to produce what Priscilla Anderson describes as “*rich, thick*” reports (Anderson 2002). Ecclestone's research demonstrated both the difficulty “*for researchers and other constituencies to delve into the messy obscurity of policy processes*” together with their need to “*understand more about the diverse constituencies and individuals that influence policy*” (Ecclestone 2002: 174). I contend that my small but influential sample of interviewees could enable me to “*delve*” effectively.

Finally, I must address the matter of interviewees' motivation and the reliance one can place on accounts that may involve “*records to set straight, scores to settle, reputations to defend, perhaps a career to rationalise*” (Ecclestone 2002: 175). While my interviewees were undoubtedly subject to such motives, the issues I was asking them to reflect on were, I suggest, sufficiently distanced from their direct individual responsibility to elicit as dispassionate an account as one can ever expect to receive. My methodological approach to analysing the evidence from this limited sample of interviews would seek to identify common strands and shared interpretations in order to avoid taking a particular account at face value. The reader should similarly treat the

accounts as inevitably coloured by their source – assisted, I hope, by my identifying them with reference to their organisational origin.

Conducting the interviews

I carried out the central set of interviews between October 2003 and March 2004. I have also included some data from interviews carried out in 2000 for previous research. Although none of the interviewees requested anonymity, I have anonymised all interviewees but two: Lord Dearing and Professor Peter Gosden. Both Lord Dearing and Professor Gosden were speaking as informed individuals, whereas all the other subjects were speaking as holders of a professional role rather than in an individual capacity. [See Appendix for a list of the interviewees]

The timing of the interviews was not opportunistic, but rather an important factor in the methodology. I wanted to approach the interviews in possession of a body of evidence which the interviews would either support or dispute. In this way I hoped to achieve that triangulation of evidence which Robson suggests “*is particularly valuable in the analysis of qualitative data where the trustworthiness of the data is always a worry*” (Robson 1993: 383).

Once I had completed the background research on the 1990s, I drew up the interview schedule with the objective of obtaining interviews with the Chief Executives of the three unitary awarding bodies and at least one high-level official from the regulatory body, and one of similar status at the Department for Education and Skills. In each case I wrote to request an interview, explained the nature of my research, and offered

to provide a transcript of the interview, which would be tape recorded, so that the subjects could withdraw any material deemed sensitive.

All requests were successful with the exception of those to one individual formerly at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and two who had been at the Department for Education and Skills; one individual involved during the 1990s had moved out of the education department and another could not spare the time to be interviewed. It is, I think, significant that I was known to virtually all those who agreed to be interviewed. The ability of civil servants to elude investigations into their involvement in policy-making remains a major obstacle, one which I have not succeeded in overcoming.

For each interview, I met the subject in his/her office or a place of his/her choosing. I began by restating what I had explained in my letter, that my interest was in the pressures on the examining boards during the 1990s. I asked each subject to begin by recalling that period, and talking about their perceptions. When they had reached the end of that 'stream of consciousness', I asked them to comment on a list of issues my research had suggested as important. [See **Figure 2.1**]

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Two subjects requested to see transcripts, but none placed any restriction on my use of the data.

Lord Dearing agreed to be interviewed at the House of Lords, but in deference to his age, I followed a different procedure. Rather than ask him about particular factors, during the 1990s, I simply asked about thinking at the time of his 1996 Report. Technical problems meant that the interview was not fully recorded, and I had only post-interview notes rather than a verbatim transcript. I interviewed Professor Gosden in the Archives Department of Leeds University.

In the last stage of my work, I carried out two additional interviews. The first, in June 2005, was with the newly appointed Director General and his Deputy at AQA; the second, in September 2005, was with the Chief Executive Officer and President of Pearson Assessments & Testing now leading Edexcel. I felt that I needed current views on the ever-changing qualifications scene to validate my conclusions. Because

Figure 2-1 Interview Prompts

Factors 1991-2002 which destabilised the Boards	
<i>A External Factors</i>	
- The 'Standards Debate': norm referencing v. criterion referencing	
- Marketisation and Competition	
- The changing Regulator and increasing regulation	
- Mergers (from 1997) and the management of change	
<i>B Internal Factors</i>	
- Personnel issues: increases in appeals, decline of markers	
- Keeping up with technology	
- Financial issues resulting from all these	

these interviews were focused more on the future than the past, I wanted the subjects to speak freely rather than be bound by particular issues I might raise. Therefore I did not record them, but took notes of what was really an open-ended conversation in response to my request for their views on 'possible ways forward for the examining boards'. In neither case was any restriction placed on my using anything that was said during the interview.

Analysing the interviews and incorporating the evidence

I decided against the use of software such as NVivo or NUDIST for analysing the interviews. I admit to a certain prejudice here, but despite receiving training in their effective use, I could not overcome my perception that such software, while eminently

suitable for large-scale analysis, is not sufficiently developed for the nuances which I was seeking in my subjects' responses. Instead, I transcribed the interviews myself, an important first step in ensuring a familiarity with the content. Then I went through the transcripts using the interview headings to structure the analysis, making notes on each individual's unstructured responses, and comparing these with their subsequent responses to my prompts. These data I have woven into the relevant sections as evidence to support or counter the point I was pursuing. I have included quite lengthy excerpts in order to provide the full flavour of the interview. I was aware of the risks in lifting brief citations out of context.

3 Constructing a coherent chapter structure

I have outlined above the rationale for the structure of the first part of the thesis: an introduction, a survey of the literature and an exposition of my theoretical framework and methodology, followed by a chapter which locates the examining boards historically and analyses the changes they experienced up to 1988.

The central section comprises a very long chapter focused on the stresses the boards experienced during the 1990s. Although I emphasise the inter-related nature of the events of the 1990s, for the sake of coherence I have broken them down into 'external' and 'internal' stresses.

The grades crisis of September 2002 was, of course, unforeseen as I began my research. However, I felt that it must be included as a sort of dramatic proof of my claim that the boards had essentially lost professional control of the qualifications they were administering. The interviews confirmed that all these principal actors saw

the episode as clear evidence of the shift in control to the regulator. Therefore, chapter five portrays those events through that lens and leads to my concluding section.

My final chapter details the conclusions I have reached based on the evidence I have produced to answer my research questions and interrogates those conclusions. I end with a sort of epilogue based on my revised conclusions which outlines two possible future directions for the English examining boards.

Chapter 3 Locating the English Examining Boards in Education History

Before embarking on the narrative which traces the origins and development of the English examining boards, I believe it is important first to establish the strong strands in the nation's educational attitudes which have influenced the shape of that curious constellation. I shall then be able to make reference to these factors as I proceed without pausing to clarify their particular derivation.

Prologue on the English Educational Mindset

I have identified four dominant attitudes and what might be described as a 'fifth column' influence, using a broad spectrum of supporting evidence:

- Learners as conforming to a platonic, three-level pattern – reflecting their social class – with abstract learning as the highest level and the only valued style;
- Voluntarism as the preferred means of bringing about educational change;
- Inter-denominational suspicions as obstacles to change;
- Private schools as inhabiting a separate sector but with powerful influence;
- The covert but powerful influence of civil servants in the education department.

Learners as a platonic hierarchy

In a nation where the dominant class was educated in the classical tradition of two ancient universities, it is unsurprising that Plato's division of the human race into an intellectual hierarchy should have strongly influenced the views of Victorian policy makers. It is more difficult to understand why it is still such a powerful element in English attitudes. This prejudice against the practical may survive within other countries, but in less explicit form. For example in Germany, applied education has been regarded as an invaluable accessory to academic qualifications within the Dual System which many countries have attempted, without conspicuous success, to imitate. Green typifies this and some Scandinavian systems as a "North European" model in contrast to the "Anglo-Saxon" profile of a labour force with low incentives to achieve Level 2 and 3 qualifications. (Green 2000) In France, despite entrenched resistance from teaching unions, the *Bac Pro* has earned its place as an alternative route for a significant tranche of French students. (Prost 2000: 22) Yet in England, of the four strands I have identified, this belief has had – and continues to have – the greatest influence on the structure of English examinations, with their treatment of academic and vocational skills as quite distinct.

An early expression of this view can be found in the Taunton Report of 1868. Established to address concerns about the nation's skills levels after the Great Exhibition of 1851 revealed that competitor nations were overtaking the begetter of the Industrial Revolution, the Schools Inquiry Commission, its official title, commended a pattern for secondary education:

First-grade schools were to be those which prepared their pupils for university entry at nineteen years of ages, teaching Greek and Latin. Second-grade schools were intended for those likely to enter the professions, leaving school at

the age of sixteen. The third-grade schools were intended for the yeoman class, leaving for work at the age of fourteen....
(Montgomery 1965: 51)

This platonic notion of the tri-partite division of learners at secondary level has survived through the years. Although establishing a national structure of the most basic secondary provision had to wait until the Balfour Act of 1902, the Taunton concept of the learning population survived to reappear in the Hadow Report of 1925, the Spens Report of 1938 and was the base of the first full secondary structure established by Butler's Education Act of 1944. The proposals of the Dearing Report of 1996 confirmed the concept to be alive and well in its hopeful recommendation of a three-track structure which would "*make explicit the equal standing of academic, applied and vocational qualifications*" (Dearing 1996: 12), despite the fact that they had resolutely remained a hierarchy.

The close connection between this hierarchy of learners and their social class was embodied at an early stage in the gradual development of post-elementary schools around the country. As the 19th century progressed, three types of school were taking shape to serve three distinct social groups well before any national system was established. In his 1990 book *Education and State Formation*, Andy Green described this pattern:

...the Anglican schools, which are dominated by the gentry and integrated with the conservative state apparatus; the middle-class schools which are articulated with industry; and independent working-class schools arising in tandem with working-class political organisations and institutions of self-help.
(Green 1990: 70)

These social divisions in the system were still evident to R H Tawney in 1931. In one of his thunderous editorials in *The Manchester Guardian* he claimed that "*The hereditary curse of English education is its organization along lines of social class.*" (Quoted in Green 1990: 307)

An inevitable corollary of the elevated regard for those capable of abstraction has been a corresponding lack of status for applied or vocational education. Until the Dearing Report of 1996 recommended a limited *rapprochement* of vocational and academic qualifications, the two fields had developed quite separately in England. A vehement critic of this division has been the military historian Corelli Barnett. He named Cardinal Newman as the model of the influential Victorian who exemplified “*the lack of interest in industry and industrial success displayed by the dominant British educational establishment*” (Barnett 1986: 238). However, he saved his bitterest criticism for what he labelled the “*New Jerusalem attitudes*” of Labour party reformers after the Second World War. He castigated their complete failure to consider the requirements of British industry when implementing the reform of secondary education. Certainly this attitude has profoundly affected the nation’s examination system.

Voluntarism rather than central direction

In his comparison of the development of state education systems, Andy Green cited English reluctance to impose any form of national system to be the factor which differentiated English (although he saw it as ‘British’) practice from that of Prussia, France or America. As the 19th century proceeded, “*...the overwhelmingly dominant values of the Victorian era were those of individualism, enterprise and laissez-faire liberalism*” (Green 1990: 228). He illustrated his point by quoting John Stuart Mill, who in *On Liberty* scornfully dismissed the need for a national education system: “*A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like*

one another...” (Quoted in Green 1990: 254). This attitude inevitably shaped the nation’s educational provision:

...The most distinctive feature of British education has been its voluntary character. Both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this voluntary approach was held to be morally, and educationally, superior to compulsory schooling schemes in continental Europe. These were associated with despotism and subservience, in contrast to the freedoms enjoyed by British citizens, which were seen as being essential to the British character. Voluntarism...meant freedom for pupils from compulsory attendance, and freedom for schools from state interference.

(Green 1990: 70)

The preference for voluntarism has remained a strong strand in English educational reforms. From the Forster Act of 1870, which endorsed the existing patchwork of elementary provision rather than establishing a uniform national system, through to the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960s, change has been suggested rather than imposed.

When the 1944 Education Act finally established a free, national, secondary education system up to age 15, the new Minister, ‘Red’ Ellen Wilkinson, approved the Ministry Circular 73 “*commending the tripartite secondary organisation to local authorities...*” (Maclure 2000: 54). Even such a passionate supporter of educational opportunity for all did not go so far as to ‘require’. The result was that the intended system was never fully realised; the technical schools flickered into existence in some areas, then faded into comprehensive schools, while the ‘modern’ schools attended by the vast majority of pupils were frequently housed in poorly adapted elementary schools. Expecting rather than demanding meant also that change was slow: the school leaving age was not raised to 16 until 1972, and the last all-age elementary school was not reorganised until 1971. (Barber 1996: 49)

When in 1965 Antony Crosland as Labour's Secretary of State for Education issued Circular 10/65, it eschewed compulsion in favour of a request to local authorities to submit plans for comprehensive reorganisation. This low-key approach was a great disappointment to comprehensive advocates like Brian Simon, who saw the voluntary, and non-funded, tone of the Circular as "*hardly reflecting a serious determination to bring about fundamental change in the structure of secondary education*" (Simon 1991: 281).

This avoidance of *diktat* has often been considered positive evidence of the nation's democratic credentials. For example, in 1895 the Liberal Party, then in opposition, set up the Bryce Commission to report on secondary provision in England and commended its "*freedom, variety and elasticity*". Green, like Simon, comments that other constructions could be put on those qualities:

...Elasticity had meant ad hoc and unplanned; variety had meant class differentiation and freedom meant the unchecked authority of the powerful to provide education solely in their own interests.
(Green 1990: 307)

Voluntarism was closely connected to and regularly resulted from the third factor in the national culture: the religious denominational divide which to a considerable degree followed the fault-lines of social class.

Inter-denominational rivalries as a brake on reform

For the better part of a century, the suspicion that existed between the two principal denominational groups obstructed change. The entrenched opposition between the Anglican establishment and Dissenters nurtured mutual suspicion. Both opposed any education plans which might benefit the other. Margaret Archer's perceptive

comment, referring to the fudged settlement of 1870, sums up the situation that prevailed for so long:

Non-decision-making was of paramount significance, for the party political defence of vested interests had militated against the introduction of a single national system of education.
(Archer 1984: 76)

The 1861 report of the Newcastle Royal Commission, charged with investigating “*The State of Popular [elementary] Education in England*”, advocated some form of local distribution of funding, but “*the idea of applying local rates did not survive the denominational antagonism of the times*” (Montgomery 1965: 40). In this instance, the source of the antagonism was the distrust of the many parents and teachers from a lower middle-class dissenting background for public funding of the National Schools which provided specific Anglican teaching (Roach 1986: 48). Confirming the negative influence of this division was the view of Charles Dickens, who maintained “*that religious sectarianism, even more than the national indifference and inertia, was responsible for the many postponements of a state system*” (Quoted in Collins and Philip 1963: 74).

When a limited form of secondary education was introduced by the Balfour Act of 1902, there was a major outcry that this meant ‘religion on the rates’ because state funding would go to existing church schools – who were equally forthright about their right to continue within a state-funded system.

The historian Roy Lowe, in assessing the contribution of R A Butler to the 1944 Education Act, recognised Butler’s skill in managing at least partially to resolve the thorny problem of church involvement in state education which had dogged English education policy for the better part of a century. “*Butler’s patient and skilful*

negotiation of the church school issue was his great contribution to what became known as the Butler Act” (Lowe 1988: 73).

Both its supporters – Anglicans and Roman Catholics, who controlled about one-third of existing schools – and its opponents – nonconformists who provided few schools but many Labour MPs – felt passionately about the existing ‘dual system’. Butler managed, by proposing what today seems the curious system of aided and controlled schools, to win the support of Archbishop Temple, yet simultaneously to avoid ruffling nonconformist feathers. The legacy of this divided system can be detected in current debates over ‘faith schools’. Although this issue has no direct connection with the examining boards, its influence has had the effect of strengthening social class divisions and the hierarchical view of learners referred to above which the examining system reflects. The final factor in the English mindset is, again, one where social class is central: the separate existence of the private school sector.

The lasting influence of the private schools

In 1864, the Clarendon Commission – established to investigate public school standards because their products were proving unreliable as administrators of empire – reported that classics should remain as the core curriculum. This centrality of classics served to set the private sector apart from state schools for the better part of a century. As the education historian Brian Simon put it, the Clarendon Commission “*created an efficient and entirely segregated system of education for the governing class – one that had no parallel in any other country*” (Simon 1974: 318). In another historian’s view, it was the very prestige of the public schools, faults and all, which

“made it seem less important that the state should create a general system of secondary education for the whole country” (Roach 1986: 238). This parallel universe outside the state sector has continued to exist and to exert an influence – certainly on examinations, as will be seen later – disproportionate to its size, which hovers at about 7% of the school population.

The private sector asked for and received its own examining board, and was completely omitted from the remit of the 1944 Education Act. A closer look at this omission neatly illustrates how these strands in English thinking are inter-related. The failure to include the public schools when planning the reform of secondary education appeared extraordinary to at least one cosmopolitan observer. Sir Fred Clarke, newly returned from a distinguished career in education *“in the dominions”* [ie in Canada and South Africa] to lead London’s Institute of Education, was struck by the absence of any reference to the public schools in the Norwood Report, on which the Act was based. He pointed out that *“the leading secondary schools of the country are nowhere discussed within its pages...”* and suggested that:

We can hardly continue to contemplate an England where the mass of the people coming on one educational path are to be governed for the most part by a minority advancing along quite a separate and more favoured path.
(Clarke 1940: 44)

Similar objections were voiced by G T Giles of the National Union of Teachers. While supportive of the Norwood Report’s general aims, he too called attention to its omissions, particularly *“its failure to address the issue of the public schools”* (McCulloch 1994: 52).

In fact, Butler had not overlooked the public school issues, but had made a tactical decision to preclude its discussion by the Norwood Committee and instead to allocate the matter to a separate committee chaired by Lord Fleming. The committee having

been asked to “*inquire into how to bring the public schools into a closer association with the general system,...the outcome was disappointing*” (McCulloch 2004: 61). The Fleming Report was published two months after Butler’s education bill, so losing any implication that the two were related. This manipulation of events suggest great skill on the part of either Butler or his civil servants in managing to avoid yet again coming to grips with England’s divided educational structure. Fleming recommended, in the favoured English manner, “*the voluntary association with the general educational system of all Public Schools*” (McCulloch 2004: 61). Thus the English reliance on voluntarism maintained class divisions and the separate private sector.

The hidden influence of educational *éminences grises*

I have tried to establish that the four factors outlined above have formed – and to a degree still form – an essential part of English educational attitudes. However, I shall also suggest that their survival through changes both in government and in other national attitudes is strongly related to the influence of civil servants in the department of education. Evidence for this statement is, naturally, difficult to unearth, but I have found repeated instances where those who have acquired expert knowledge of a particular area of education have detected such influence.

Perhaps the best known and most widely acknowledged of influential civil servants is Sir Robert Morant. In his role as Permanent Secretary of the Board of Education, Morant drafted the bill that became the 1902 Balfour Education Act. The first in a long line of influential civil servants in the education department, Sir Robert was “*a controversial but outstanding figure*” (Sharp 2002: 99). His admirers acknowledge a certain high-handedness in his approach, but praise his achievement in shaping Edwardian secondary education as:

...a ladder to universities for the poor boy and girl of parts, a reservoir for the 10,000 teachers needed for state elementary schools and well-grounded entrants for the professions.... Sir Robert Morant provided the people of England with the possibility of what he held they ought to want.
(Petch 1953: 51)

Despite his undoubted achievements, in hindsight he can be portrayed as:

...a destructive force...[who] played an important part in the deliberate destruction both of the system of school boards...and of the cardinal ideas on which it was based.
(Sharp 2002: 99)

Certainly Brian Simon was of the latter opinion. He felt that by replacing the local School Boards with Local Education Authorities in the 1902 Act, the Government – prompted by Morant – effectively ended popular influence in state secondary schools. This policy decision ensured both the survival of church schools and the continued autonomy of the private sector, those enduring stands in the educational fabric. (Simon 1974: 21) Similar criticism of Sir Robert’s influence came from a critic of a different political persuasion:

The outstanding figure in this regard [ignoring the importance of technical education in favour of a public-school, classics bias] is Sir Robert Morant, the civil servant who was largely responsible for preparing and implementing the 1902 Education Act, the most important single piece of legislation in the field before the Butler Act of 1944. Hardly surprisingly [due to his background of Winchester, then Classics, Hebrew and Christian Union at Oxford], he was to set out in office not to provide England with education for capability [either general or technical] that could match that of her rivals, but to demolish what little had been gradually built up by his time.
(Barnett 1986: 223)

In view of the entrenched nature of the attitudes that Morant personified, it is difficult to sustain the view that this one individual should be held responsible for the English aversion to applied learning as a legitimate pursuit. It is a thread that runs constantly through the fabric of the nation’s educational attitudes, and is still seen as problematic in the Tomlinson Report of 2004. However, no one disputes that this civil servant rather than any politician was responsible for drafting the Act.

The outstanding historian of education administration, Peter Gosden, has recorded such influence to be a clear aim of education department officials in the middle of the 20th century. He quotes R S Wood, Deputy Secretary of the Board of Education as suggesting in November 1940 [referring to the education problems that would be faced when the war ended] that, “*I think this is a matter where the Board should lead rather than follow*” (Gosden 1976: 238). Although I see this ambition as a step toward the eventual dominance of education by the department, it is important to note that at the time the motivation was – at least in the view of Peter Gosden – less based on a desire for power than on the need to ensure fairness across the nation:

This emphasis on the need for the Board to assert itself and to offer active leadership corresponded exactly to the increasingly widespread view that the disparity of provision between the various local authorities was no longer acceptable and that far more emphasis needed to be placed on national policy; only greater centralization could undo the inequity between children of different districts which became so apparent during the evacuation and could ensure that there would be more purposeful national planning in education.
(Gosden 1976: 240)

Such claims to be acting in the interests of fairness for all can, of course, always serve as a justification for increasing central control.

Later in the century, Denis Lawton cited events following the 1944 Education Act as evidence for his claims regarding the ambitions of civil servants in the education department. Referring to the Labour Minister Ellen Wilkinson’s being persuaded to endorse Circular 103, drawn up under the Conservative R A Butler’s term at the Board of Education and meeting fierce opposition at the Labour Party conference in the autumn of 1945, Lawton suggests:

This is just one example of ministers being persuaded by civil servants to carry on with a policy laid down either by a previous administration of a different political complexion or by the civil servants themselves.
(Lawton 1980: 30)

Evidence of the unusual power of civil servants in the DES comes also from a politician who had experience of ministerial briefs in several departments. When he came to Education as Secretary of State in May 1986, Kenneth Baker commented on the “*formidable intellectual bullying*” (Quoted in Jenkins 1996: 117) of Walter Ulrich, head of the Schools Branch. Baker felt that Ulrich had held Sir Keith Joseph and his Junior Minister, Chris Patten, under the spell of his “*fine Wykehamist mind*”. Both ministers had tended to “*concede the intellectual point rather than persist with the political argument*” (Jenkins 1996: 117).

In exactly the same manner 40 years later, the proposals in the consultation paper *Guaranteeing Standards* regarding changes to the examining boards and issued by Conservative Gillian Shephard were enacted unaltered by Labour’s Tessa Blackstone, evidently persuaded by civil servants of the merits of the policy they had drafted. The involvement of a particular civil servant in ensuring his – or at least the department’s – desired outcome in this instance was mentioned spontaneously by two different examining board officials in the interviews I conducted in the course of this research:

I can remember when [a named senior official], DfES – or DfEE, rather – came into a room...to tell us about what was going on and [said], ‘There’ll be three [awarding bodies]’. It was in the basement of Sanctuary Buildings...and he made this statement. We’d had a meeting with him, and this was right at the end.
(OCR2 2003)

A second recollection of the same meeting was equally precise:

And I do recall, and I even recall the date on this: the twelfth of December 1997, sorry 1996, a meeting in the Department where [the same named official] really made it clear that the expectation would be that there would be only three unitary awarding bodies.
(AQA2 2003)

This covert civil service influence is significant for this study, which posits the growth of such influence in the form of the modern “*managerial state*” (Clarke and Newman

1997) as a motive force in the shift of power from the Boards to the centre. Yet, apart from occasional glimpses like those cited, one cannot pierce the blanket of obscurity provided by anonymity in order to distinguish between the influence of civil servants and the politicians they advise. Therefore, I have decided to include both within the concept of the “*managerial state*”. The analysis as to the exact source of various policy decisions will have to await a more transparent age than the current one. This concludes my ‘prologue’. With what might be described as the English educational map’s essential philosophical features in place, I shall now proceed to the narrative which details the origins and growth of the examining boards.

A The Origins and Development of the Independent English Examining Boards

The unusual structure of England’s independent examining boards came into being well before a national secondary school system existed. They emerged as a classic Victorian solution to a problem: devised by products of the ancient universities and quite outside any government involvement. The problem was the unreliable standard of the products of post-elementary education. Whether proceeding to imperial administration or to university education, the young men emerging from the range of educational institutions were difficult to evaluate as suitable for their chosen direction. It was unfortunate, in view of how the initial structure has survived, that from the outset the essential difference between accreditation and selection was not recognised and has survived to bedevil examinations to this day. However, as a solution to an immediate problem, the Boards created to solve it were so well suited to the society they served that they could fit a slightly edited version of R H Tawney’s description,

in an editorial in *The Manchester Guardian* of 17 August 1937, of the equally exceptional English public schools:

...the very term...caused 'perpetual astonishment to foreign observers'. Yet to most Englishmen the system they form appears a feature of the social landscape at once so inevitable and so edifying that only impiety or malice will venture to challenge it.

It is still the case that these organisations are largely taken for granted as fixtures of the English secondary system. I believe that this is because they developed as organic creations of their society and have, until recently, broadly retained their distinctive character. With the objective of making the case that they have now lost an essential element of that character, I shall trace their history from their origins until the end of the 1980s: a history that falls into two broad periods: from their origins to 1944, and then from 1944 to 1988. The third, most recent period becomes the focus of the fourth chapter of this study.

Part 1: A Victorian selection device become a national system

One of the distinguished historians of English education began his chronicle of examinations in 19th century England with the sentence, “*Public examinations were one of the great discoveries of nineteenth-century Englishmen*” (Roach 1971: 3). This sweepingly Eurocentric claim overlooks the major role examinations have played in China from the time of the 7th-century T’ang Dynasty, with merit-based examinations a continuing selecting device throughout the country’s history. (Spence 1990)

Although comparatively late on a global scale, then, certain eminent Victorians familiar with examinations from their experience at Oxford or Cambridge did indeed conclude that adapting the notion of the university examination to accredit a wider

public could serve a useful purpose in society. The competitive aspect of examinations accorded well with their belief in the character-building effect of sports like cricket and rugby. The sporting notion of ‘a level playing field’ was another attractive feature of examinations as a fair means of selection. However, it was the problem of administering an empire that led the Victorians to turn to examinations as a solution.

As the 19th century progressed and imperial responsibilities grew ever more demanding, it became clear that there was a need for improved methods of selecting administrators. Established practice, based on gentlemanly status and nepotism, was delivering people who were proving unsuitable for the imperial responsibilities required of them. *“By 1858 the belief in ‘competition as against restriction or private favour’ was in the air, for it fitted the ethos of the age”* (Roach 1971: 18). It was natural that in their quest for a fair and effective means of selection the products of the Cambridge Tripos or Oxford Greats would turn to examinations as the ideal solution.

In order to structure what seemed a series of random developments, I have constructed a matrix showing the principal steps in the process of developing an examining system in England [See **Figure 3.1**], with summaries of the rationale which lay behind them and the effects they had. This section will expand on those steps which by 1918 saw a national system of secondary examinations administered by eight different university examining boards which dominated the body established to regulate the system.

It was a teachers’ organisation that claimed the credit for first administering simultaneous examinations to large groups in secondary schools. The College of Preceptors, comprising mainly the headmasters of the much-criticised ‘middle-class

schools', inaugurated examinations as part of its function of inspecting schools and accrediting teachers. However, the middle classes who paid for their children to attend these schools were inclined to despise the "*intellectual and social pretensions*" of teachers, risen for the most part from the working class. (Roach, 1971 #1: 49) As well as being coloured with teachers' low status, the College of Preceptors' impartiality was suspect: it was seen as a case of teachers assessing themselves. For a time the time the College sustained a limited following; its influence peaked at the end of the nineteenth century, when it examined 17 000 candidates in 1893 (Montgomery 1965: 64). However, probably because of the impartiality factor, its qualifications were refused recognition by the Board of Education after its creation in 1899. The Board accredited only the qualifications of the university examining boards, so the College of Preceptors declined to the status of a fringe organisation, still extant as the College of Teachers.

The process of convincing Victorian society of the value of competitive examinations as a selection device seemed to begin with Robert Lowe's introduction of competitive examination for the Indian Civil Service through the India bill of 1853. Then Charles Trevelyan's positive experience of those examinations in India enabled him to convince powerful Englishmen to support the idea for the Home Civil Service. Trevelyan could be described as the role model for generations of civil servants whose legacy was concealed behind the politicians they served. C E Trevelyan trained at the East India Company's college at Haileybury, and served very successfully in

Figure 3-1 Developing an English Examinations System

Steps in the Development of the English Secondary School Examining System

Date	Development	Rationale	Primary Effects	Indirect Effects
1846	College of Preceptors formed and offered examinations to schools	To train teachers and examine pupils in middle-class schools	Limited due to teachers' low status and perceived self-interest	Teachers' low status tainted examinations
1854	Entry to Indian Civil Service by examination established	To eliminate nepotism and improve administration	Examinations solve selection problems	Raised status of examinations
1856	J L Brereton's West Country examinations held in Exeter at Easter	To improve young men's agricultural skills	Interest generated in other educational thinkers	Examinations seen as effective at school level
1857	Oxford Local Exams Delegacy established	To accredit boys' attainment at 15 and 18	University examines secondary schools	University status confers quality
1858	Cambridge Local Exams Syndicate established	To accredit attainment in schools with Cambridge links	Offered an alternative university examining board	Established concept of choice of boards
1858	London Matriculation established	To select for entrance to Nonconformist University College	Selection by examination spread beyond Oxbridge	Reinforced selection by examination
1873	Joint Oxford & Cambridge Board established	Headmaster's Conference plea for separate accreditation	Examinations accepted by public schools	Enabled public schools to exert influence
1903	Joint Matriculation Board established	For selection to northern universities	Acceptance of university boards in whole country	End of possibility of single national body
1911	Dyke Acland Report	To address the multiplicity of professional selection examinations	Recommended a single national system	Confirmed role of existing boards
1912	National Certificates launched	To replace the many examinations for selection to professions	National system	System and independent boards
1917	Secondary Schools Examinations Council established	To act as a consultative body overseeing the new system	Boards in majority as recognised experts	Government role is at arm's length

India. On his return he married Hannah Macaulay, sister of the great historian. Through this link, he acquired a network of powerful friends within the universities.

These connections strengthened his position when he moved to the Treasury to work with Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. When Gladstone became Prime Minister and was considering civil service reform, it was natural that he should turn to Trevelyan. It was equally natural that Trevelyan should apply to an English problem the lessons he had learned in the laboratory of Indian administration (Roach 1971: 23).

Although Lord Northcote's name took precedence over Trevelyan's in the title of the report when it was published, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1853 was certainly the product of Trevelyan's thinking. With his powerful connections made explicit, it becomes clearer how the selection proposals in the report won significant support when many earlier attempts to introduce an element of competition into appointments had failed. In proposing examinations for competitive entry to the higher levels of the civil service, the report served as an early skirmish in a long campaign. Convincing the public of the wisdom of such a radical change was a challenging task despite its eminent champions.

Gladstone attempted to soothe the doubts of Queen Victoria, who worried over the prospect of appointing someone who was "*first in ability*" but might otherwise be "*very ineligible*" – perhaps her way of questioning the suitability of those whom the English have come to label as 'too clever by half'. He assured her that:

Experience at the universities and public schools of this country has shown that in a large majority of cases the test of open examination is also an effectual test of character; as, except in very remarkable cases, the previous industry and self-denial, which proficiency evinces, are rarely separated from general habits of virtue.

(Quoted in Roach 1971: 31)

Gladstone did not share with his monarch the less than democratic views that he had expressed to Lord John Russell a few days earlier in 1854:

I do not hesitate to say that one of the great recommendations of the change [to open competition] in my eyes would be its tendency to strengthen and multiply the ties between the higher class and the possession of administrative power.... I have a strong impression that the aristocracy of this country are even superior in natural gifts, on the average, to the mass.... This applies in its degree to all those who may be called gentlemen by birth and training.

(Quoted in Roach 1971: 193)

Despite his strong support for selection by examination, it was not until 1870 that Gladstone managed to introduce open competition by examination to the English civil service. Yet the fact that the issue of examinations was a matter of keen public debate by the great men of the day enhanced the possibility of introducing the idea at an earlier stage of education:

Just as the administrative reformers saw public examination as a remedy for political corruption and a test of personal competence, so the educational reformers saw it as a remedy against local pressures on the teacher and as a means of raising professional standards.

(Roach 1971: 55)

It was progressive educationists concerned about the above-mentioned middle-class schools who were to succeed in introducing examinations as a means of what would now be termed 'quality assurance'; their selection function, which has become their overriding purpose, was not initially the major objective.

A brief snapshot of mid-Victorian secondary education reveals the causes of concern over the middle *tranche* of what provision there was. The upper classes felt themselves to be well served by the public schools which could educate their (younger) sons to proceed to the ancient universities of Oxford or Cambridge. This powerful group therefore had no reason to seek change. The emerging middle class aspired to an upper-class education in a public school for their offspring should their

fortunes improve, but meanwhile were determined to maintain their distance from the stratum below them in the social order. They were suspicious of state interference. Including “*gentlemen of small incomes..., trades people, the farmers, the merchants and the superior class of mechanics* (Quoted in Roach 1971: 43), these people were determined to remain distinct from their social inferiors by paying for their children to be educated. Therefore, unless their sons qualified for the limited number of ‘grammar’ schools, these solid citizens sent them to ‘lower private schools’ – as a result often called ‘middle class schools’ (Roach 1986: 61). These institutions were often of a dubious standard and were famously parodied in Dickens’ “*Dotheboys Hall*”.

The great majority at the bottom of the social pyramid, who might have seen education as a means of advancement, had to depend for any education either on the Church in the form of Sunday Schools or on other charitable bodies or individuals. Since in English thinking the educational needs of the labouring classes were limited, this group was not a major source of Victorian concern. It was the middle-class schools that were the first focus of reformers.

In his book *Public Examinations in England 1850-1900*, John Roach has documented several successive “*efforts of private individuals to achieve reforms*” (Roach 1971: 44). In Sussex, Nathaniel Woodard established three schools – Lancing, Hurstpierpoint and Ardingly – which still survive, although his differentiation of the original client groups into a hierarchy of three social classes has faded. However it was J L Brereton in the West Country whose “*plans give a definite place to public examinations as a means to effecting improvements*” (Roach 1971: 43) and is therefore of most interest here.

A product of Matthew Arnold's regime at Rugby, Brereton aimed to achieve improvements in agricultural practice through the education of young farmers. He advocated a structure of schools similar to that adopted by Woodard in Sussex, but with the added factor of an annual county examination for the awarding of prizes and scholarships. His ambitious plans for a "*County Education*" system, published in 1856, proposed a structure of schools for boys and girls between 12 and 15, then a college for boys from 15 to 17, all supported by a combination of fees and the pupils' labour on an attached farm. "*The keystone of the whole system would be an annual county examination...at which youths between sixteen and twenty-four...might sit for a 'County Degree'*" (Roach 1971: 52). This idea was the genesis of the first Oxford Local Examinations in 1857. One of history's many ironies is that the English examining system which in 2006 has yet to incorporate successfully the assessment of applied skills grew out of a scheme for agricultural improvement.

Brereton's west country schools won the support of Lord Ebrington, an influential landowner and Whig supporter of social reform, who "*offered a prize of £20 for the best examination passed by a young man between eighteen and twenty-three years old, the son or relative of a Devonshire farmer*" (Roach 1971: 50). Members of the Bath and West Society agreed to help organise the project, and the examination took place at Exeter in Easter week of 1856.

The scheme caught the attention of T D Acland, already involved in the National Schools movement. He recognised in such an examination a means of building in standards in the vexed area of the middle-class schools. He convened a committee which proposed in January 1857 the creation of a wider system of examinations and prizes based on the Exeter model. Through his status as an Oxford double first and

fellow of All Souls, he won the support of Frederick Temple – fellow of Balliol, then chaplain to Queen Victoria, next to be Headmaster of Rugby and eventual Archbishop of Canterbury. Temple in turn wrote to the Master of Balliol to enlist Oxford's examining experience in setting up the project. Temple's letter of 25 February 1857 provides a blueprint of the eventual English secondary schools examinations system:

...The University should appoint a competent Board of Examiners; that these examiners should be prepared to examine all boys between certain ages presented to them under certain regulations; ...that the expenses of the examination should be covered by a small fee from every candidate. If Oxford began, Cambridge would soon follow. In this way the universities would give guidance to those schools which is sadly needed.
(Roach 1971: 69)

Oxford accepted the plan – although there followed the inevitable arguments about issues such as the title to be assigned to the qualification. Associate of Arts (A.A.) had been proposed, but provoked opposition because it would devalue the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) which cost graduates' parents £100. In what seems from the perspective of modern timescales a very short time, the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations came into being and held its first examination in June 1857. It continued to fulfil that function until 'absorbed' by the Cambridge Syndicate in 1996. This prototype of the English examining board was the model that other universities followed subsequently with virtually no variation on Temple's brief outline.

As Temple had predicted, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) held its first series of examinations in December of 1857. The following year both universities decided to hold their examinations in June, the practice that has been followed since that date. At the outset, a move to a single series of examinations for the whole country was a definite possibility. Suggestions that the two universities should combine forces and offer a single series of examinations led to joint discussions. However by 1860 they had been unable to agree on the ever-vexed

question of a qualification title and opted to proceed separately. A direct result of that relatively minor quibble was the unique English structure of independent university examining boards providing a national qualifications system. One is reminded of the nursery rhyme:

*For want of a battle
The Kingdom was lost,
And all for the want
Of a horse shoe nail.*

In this instance, the possibility of a single national examination provision was lost for want of an agreed title for the qualification.

The creation also in 1858 of the London Matriculation¹ ensured the availability of a university entrance examination for a wider segment of society, because University College, the original institution of the University of London, was the first to drop a Church of England affiliation from its entry requirements.² The almost coincidental creation of the first three examining boards had occurred not through a particular policy decision but, in the preferred English manner, from voluntary initiatives.

The reputation of the new examinations was initially coloured by their connection with the middle-class schools. Grammar schools that already had an established link with a university were not at first tempted to use the new examinations. They elicited strong objections from the College of Preceptors, who perceived the university examinations to be invading their territory, as indeed they were. They claimed that “*Oxford examiners [were] not at all well suited to examine the studies of middle-class schools*” (Roach 1971: 90). However, because of the low esteem in which the College was held, this protest may well have had the opposite effect from that intended. Gradually the examinations began to prove their worth.

Incontrovertible evidence that they were becoming well regarded was the appeal from the newly-established Headmasters' Conference to the old universities to offer a separate examining body for their pupils in the private sector. They had overcome their instinctive antagonisms to form their organisation in 1870 because of their alarm at the 1868 Taunton Report. As well as proposing a three-level system of secondary schools, the report had recommended as a method of regulating these schools the creation of a system of state-controlled examinations. Countering Matthew Arnold, who supported the Taunton proposals, "*Goldwyn Smith, the Professor of Modern History at Oxford, came out strongly against the continental practice of placing authority for inspection or examination at the centre of power*" (Montgomery 1965: 53). Goldwyn Smith's stance prevailed, and the 1870 Forster Act omitted any recommendations regarding either secondary education or examinations.

Instead, the great majority of English children received only an elementary education until after the Second World War. Had the Forster Act included the Taunton recommendations regarding secondary education, the course of English educational history – and the related examinations system – might have been very different. The historian who has made a study of this period concluded that the failure to act on the wider recommendations of the Taunton Report "*...can be regarded as a major disaster for English education*" (Roach 1986: 110).

In place of a central national system, university examining boards proliferated. The result of the Headmasters' Conference request was the establishment in 1873 of the fourth examining board: the Oxford and Cambridge Joint Board, which throughout its existence served the private sector. Critics who felt that even this would cramp the independent schools' freedom were assured by the headmaster of Winchester that the

universities' examinations were *"likely to be more flexible and less subject to the whims of cranks or bureaucrats than anything controlled by the government"* (Roach 1971: 235). In view of the Byzantine organisational structure of the Joint Board, touched on in Chapter Four, it was hardly likely to be a flexible body. Worries about government control were well in advance of their time, but indicative of the prevailing suspicion of central direction in English educational circles.

In the north of England, a parallel structure was forming. The three colleges Liverpool, Owens in Manchester and Yorkshire in Leeds federated in the 1880s under the umbrella title of Victoria University. They had gained the allegiance of local grammar schools through their provision of effective standards of inspection of those schools and then of examining their pupils. As the colleges moved towards independence as separate universities, they wished to retain some measure of cooperation. To this end they formed the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) in 1903. Sheffield University was admitted to the JMB in 1905 and Birmingham University in 1916.³ This board formed a powerful counterpoise in the north to the Oxbridge/London influence in the south. The JMB was considered by J L Brereton of the Cambridge Syndicate to be more realistic than was London in its planning of examinations and less affected by those interested only in university teaching. *"Perhaps this was due to the great advantage which the Board possessed in having among its twenty-two members two headmasters and two headmistresses"* (Brereton 1944: 101). This generous assessment of what in modern marketised thinking was a competitor is indicative of the spirit that prevailed among the Boards – certainly prior to the advent of GCE and the first major change to their tranquil world. The JMB, which *"soon became by far the largest"* (Brereton 1944: 101), retained this strong element of practitioners' representation throughout its history, and passed on that

tradition to its successor bodies the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board (1993) and the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (2000). It is this factor which has characterised this board with a strong public service ethos, an important aspect of how it responded to the pressures of the 1990s.

The universities of Durham and Bristol eventually each formed their own examining boards. This brought to seven the number of English boards, with the Welsh Board the arbiter for university entrance in the Principality. At the outset, they concentrated on providing examinations to select students for the particular universities of which they formed a part. Gradually the universities came to accept each others' qualifications, although it was far from an automatic process. The Charities Commission granted them charitable status, which they have retained. This structure of seven English university examining boards became an accepted part of the educational landscape and adapted effortlessly to the establishment of a national qualification structure in 1911.

Part 2: Rationalising examinations: the move to national School

Certificates

Once examinations had proved their effectiveness in university selection, their popularity spread rapidly. Before the end of the 19th century, most professional bodies required applicants to sit their particular entrance examinations. The result was that young people faced the prospect of sitting numerous selection tests as they sought future pathways. This proliferation concerned the Board of Education, established in 1899, and led it to set up the Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary

Schools. Its report, published in 1911 and known as the Dyke Acland Report, advocated a more uniform examining system.

The immediate result was that in 1912 the university boards cooperated in creating England's first national structure of 'School Certificates'. These were what is now termed 'grouped' qualifications; candidates were examined in specified subjects within a narrow range of specialisms while also completing papers in general subjects. Each examining board offered its own version of this scheme, and schools were free to enter candidates with any board. Theoretically, then, the Boards were in competition, although in practice the small number of grammar schools tended to have connections with one or other of the university boards.

It is important for this study to note that the design and implementation of the new scheme was entrusted to the Boards with no involvement from the Board of Education. Because the war intervened, it was not until 1917 that the Board of Education set up a 'light touch' regulatory body in the form of the Secondary Schools Examinations Council (SSEC). This body of 21 members represented the university boards (10), local authorities (5) and teachers (6). Its link to the Board of Education was through its Chairman and Secretary, whom the Board nominated (Brereton 1944: 95). There was no question that the examining boards' role was that of the professionals on the Council. The power balance was spelled out by an official of the Cambridge board: "*The Board [of Education] holds the ultimate power of control through the examination fees, but has expressed its intention of being advised by the Council in all matters concerning examinations.*" (Brereton 1944: 95) This is almost the exact reverse of the present-day relationship between the Boards and their regulator: all matters concerning examinations are advised by the regulator, while the

Boards must decide how to pitch their fees so as to remain solvent but not imperil their market. An official of a modern-day Board was well aware of the contrast: “*If you look at Boards at that time, ...they clearly were independent bodies, accountable to [their respective] universities*” (AQA1 2000).

However, their independent status did not mean that they were isolated from the schools they served. An important factor in ensuring the success of the School Certificates was the system of consultation with the teaching profession that the Boards developed:

All the examining bodies (except the Oxford and Cambridge Joint Board which had a special problem since it dealt mainly with public schools) ...devised machinery for consultation with official representatives of the four Secondary Teachers' Associations and the Independent Schools Association.
(Brereton 1944: 100)

Looking back on this early period, Brereton could detect that this involvement with teachers, perhaps even more than the move to a national examination structure, changed the Boards significantly:

During a period of about fifteen years the examining bodies were transformed from a set of university bodies considering themselves set apart from and above the schools, to the present state in which they all included teachers and local education officers among their members.
(Brereton 1944: 101)

This lesson is one that has been forgotten and will be returned to in my concluding chapter. The role of teachers is an important one, for it became their decision as to which Board's syllabus suited their particular students. The assumption that teachers have a right to select from a 'menu' of versions of national examinations is another of the strands that has taken deep root in English educational terrain. No other country offers its teachers and their students such a choice. It therefore seems important to include their professional perspective within the structure – a concept which has been lost sight of in the current practice of the “*managerial state*”.

The School Certificates came to be widely accepted and continued to accredit the fortunate few of the population who by virtue of either their parents' prosperity or their own ability managed to find a place in a secondary school. There developed an undercurrent of criticism that the importance of the Certificates meant that the examining boards virtually determined the upper secondary curriculum. This view was articulated by the historian G M Trevelyan. He spoke for some education practitioners in his claim that when examinations were created in Victorian times "*the evils of the examination system, especially its effect on school education, were not yet realized, nor were they as great as they have since become*" (Trevelyan 1944: 568). However because this negative opinion appeared in a book published in the USA in 1942 but, due to wartime paper restrictions, not available in England until the summer of 1944, it did not influence discussions around the Education Act of that year.

The examination boards continued to administer the system of School Certificates for forty years virtually free of the external interference which was to dominate the last years of the century. The system's survival was very likely due less to its lack of flaws than to its limited impact on the population at large. The issues of widening access to and selection for secondary education were of much greater importance between the two world wars. During that time, England experienced a period of social, political and economic turmoil which meant that virtually none of the hoped-for reforms of the 1918 Education Act was implemented. The leaving age was raised to 14 from 1921, but there was not an appropriate curriculum for pupils staying on in elementary schools. Employers anxious to retain a supply of low-cost labour had no enthusiasm for reform. Simon's history of education between the wars suggests that the leaders of industry objected:

...to any material improvement in the education of the working class which required public expenditure; or which removed the pool of cheap labour provided by the 14 to 16 age groups which, excluded from insurance safeguards and wages agreements no less than schools, were on call for unskilled work in industry and dead-end jobs in the distributive trades.
(Simon 1974: 64)

Despite such opposition, in the 1920s and again in the 1930s, committees were established to suggested solutions to the acknowledged limitations on access to English secondary education. Although neither of the resulting reports was implemented, they are important because both fed into the thinking of the Norwood Report which shaped the major changes brought about in the 1944 Education Act.

In December 1925, the Hadow Committee reported on its investigations into the glaring weaknesses in the education of the majority of children over the age of 11. However, as with the Forster Act of 1870 and the Balfour Act of 1902, Hadow did not grasp the nettle and recommend full-scale reform. Board of Education officials had framed the committee's terms of reference so as to exclude consideration of secondary education for all and to retain the existing selective secondary sector as a separate track.

Therefore, despite its being perceived in its day as a progressive way forward, the Hadow Report reinforced the notion of education as a preparation for life in a stratified society. The few would begin to climb the ladder at 11 through selective tests, while the other 75% remained on a bottom rung in what Hadow termed “modern” schools – to be added to existing elementary provision – until they left at 14. Simon identifies the Hadow Report's recommendation of “*selection by differentiation*” as part of the official ideology of the Board of Education. “*This was to be the key function of the education system, to which educational considerations were subordinated over many years to come*” (Simon 1974: 146). Lowe was even

more specific in identifying the role one individual played in ensuring the survival of the three-level system in England:

As the twentieth century progressed and the Board of Education committed itself increasingly to a tripartite organization of secondary education, other civil servants devised, in official reports, an account of the history of English education which emphasized the appropriateness of a divided system. R. Fitzgibbon Young was perhaps the most notable, as the author of the historical sections of the 1926 Hadow Report and the 1938 Spens Report. Young served as secretary of a number of influential Consultative Committee reports during the inter-war years and repeatedly offered accounts of the development of English education which reflected favourably upon Board of Education policies, showing them as the natural outcome of gradual and almost inexorable policies. (Lowe 1983: 27)

Throughout the 20th century, there has existed this close connection between education policy and individuals within the Board of Education in its successive forms. In the 21st century the connection has if anything become closer, and the impulse for government to take greater control over education has accelerated, as will be shown in the following chapter.

To return to the reports, the thinking behind the Hadow Report can be discerned in the Spens Report that followed a decade later. The Consultative Committee on Secondary Education, chaired by Sir Will Spens, published its report at the end of 1938. It carried forward broadly the structure advocated in the Hadow Report. It did include a proposal that *“the curriculum of the existing grammar schools should be broadened but also recommended that junior technical schools should be upgraded to secondary school status to become ‘technical high schools’”* (McCulloch 1994: 74). In regard to examinations, the report was judged from an examining board perspective to have *“failed to disclose the real trouble, which was that the simple School Certificate Examination did not differentiate sufficiently between the better and the average students”* (Brereton 1944: 106). However, that particular trouble still remains to be

disclosed. Sixty years later an official of the same board made virtually the same observation in an interview:

The key thing that we've got to get to grips with is, 'Is what he [Tomlinson] is talking about the education and training of our youngsters and representing what they've achieved or is it about university selection? And please don't pretend you can use one for another without it distorting one or the other.
(OCR2 2003)

The inopportune timing of the Spens Report's publication just before the outbreak of war meant it was shelved in the same way as the Hadow Report had been by the economic depression. However Spens' proposals were dusted down in 1941 and offered to the Norwood Committee as a basis for its deliberations. The Norwood Report's recommendations opened the doors of secondary education to all young people through the 1944 Education Act. An indirect outcome of this reform was the first of the series of inroads into the examining boards' independence in favour of growing central control. The Victorian distaste for government involvement in educational matters was becoming a distant memory in post-war England.

Part 3: The slow shift to central control of the examining boards 1944-1988

Among the major changes to English secondary education resulting from the 1944 Education Act was an apparently minor adjustment to the membership of the Secondary Schools Examinations Council. This particular regulation significantly affected the examining boards, but was of little interest in the wider world. However this proved to be the first move in a gradually accelerating process of tightening central control over the independent examining boards. This section will narrate the process of change that led to that shift in control, once again mapped by a matrix [See **Figure 3.2**] detailing the series of changes both to examinations and to their

regulatory body during this period. As indicated in the matrix, the period will be considered in three phases:

- 1944: Education Act, GCEs and SSEC without the Boards;
- 1964: Schools Council, ‘golden age’ and ineffectual examination reform;
- 1983: shift to central control as the price of GCSE

An appreciation of the wider issues determining the direction of change will explain how policies that had a major impact on the examining boards were devised with other objectives as their aim.

A The 1944 Act and the birth of the GCE

On 18 September 2003, in a Radio 4 retrospective assessment of the achievements of the post-war Labour government, Will Hutton suggested that *“If health is the great success, education is the great failure of the Atlee government.”* He was referring to Labour’s failure to address the dichotomy of state and private schools. This judgement would fit the category of what Gary McCulloch sees as a revisionist view of the 1944 Act *“predicated on the notion of something akin to an Establishment conspiracy, dedicated to the maintenance of social inequality through tripartite divisions in education”* (McCulloch 1994: 54). I have indicated at the outset of this chapter that the acceptance of a separate path for the private sector is deeply grounded in English thinking. Therefore I tend toward David Cannadine’s term *“temporal parochialism”* (Cannadine 2002) for this form of distorting the past through the lens of the present. In order to avoid either revisionism or temporal parochialism, it is

instructive to separate as far as possible the notions that subsequent generations have grafted on with hindsight from the principal issues in the air at the time. Looking back at the 1944 Act after half a century, McCulloch assessed these issues astutely:

On the positive side, it reflected aspirations for equality of opportunity, political consensus, and social partnership. Read negatively, it signified the power of elite groups to manipulate public provision, leading either to entrenched social divisions and inequality, or to industrial decay and economic atrophy. (McCulloch 1994: 68)

Certainly the thinking behind the Act came from what could fairly be termed elite groups. Its philosophical ancestry stems directly from the platonic notion of three types of learner described in the Taunton Report of 1868, the Hadow (1925) and Spens (1938) Reports and yet again in the Norwood Report of 1943, its closest relation. In attempting to follow Ecclestone's advice about "*the importance of understanding more about individuals that influence policy*" (Ecclestone 2002: 174), it is informative to trace the ideas of Sir Will Spens and Sir Cyril Norwood as they affected the policy which bears Butler's name.

Figure 3-2 Post -1944 Examination Developments

Date	Development	Rationale	Primary Effects	Indirect Effects
1944	Butler Education Act	To offer free secondary education to all to age 15; to reduce influence of examinations on curriculum	Three-level system with examinations for top 20%; exam boards ejected from SSEC	Confirms platonic view of learners; first sign of central control over boards
1951 & 1953	Launch of General Certificate of Education at Ordinary and Advanced levels	To replace rigid grouped qualification with single-subject examinations	Single subject exams established specialisation and choice	Demand for accreditation of wider range of pupils
1953	Associated Examining Board created	To accredit attainment of 'new' technical and further education college. students	A non-university examining board offers new subjects	Comparability begins to be an issue; AEB gradually loses its distinctive quality
1964	Schools Council replaces SSEC (exam boards not included)	To involve teachers & LEAs in curriculum and examinations	Series of proposals for post-16 exam reforms; none succeeded	Confirmed reform as voluntary and exclusion of boards from exam design
1965	Certificate of Secondary Education introduced	To accredit attainment of 40% of pupils below O level	Creation of 13 regional CSE boards; financial stability for 'old' boards	Sheep/goats effect built in to examination structure
1970	Schools Council authorises pilot schemes for single 16+ examination	To respond to pressure from comprehensive schools to replace O level/CSE divide	Pilot schemes succeed; governments will not endorse a single system	Schools Council's approach increasingly ineffectual
1983	Sir Keith Joseph agrees to a single examination at 16+	To respond to pressure from schools	Increases in attainment year on year	Pressure increases for widening 6 th -form provision
1984	Secondary Examinations Council replaces Schools Council	To replace an ineffectual body: quarrelling unions, LEAs no longer interested	Exam regulation becomes an issue for central involvement	A major shift in control from boards to government-appointed regulator

Spens, Norwood and Butler: Following the same hymn sheet

McCulloch's close analysis of the Spens and Norwood committees and their respective chairmen detects some important differences between the two men despite their broad agreement on a three-level structure for secondary education. These differences range from their derivation – Sir Will Spens from the Board of Education's Consultative Committee and Sir Cyril Norwood from the Secondary Schools Examinations Committee – to their respective views on the purpose of secondary education. McCulloch describes Spens as having “more materialistic, individualistic, scientific concerns” and focussing on the “*ordinary secondary school*”, whereas Norwood's stance was “*moral, community-spirited*” and centred on the grammar school (McCulloch 1994:122). One might now characterise them as respectively modern and traditional. Their philosophy of education had a direct effect on their beliefs about the secondary curriculum. For Spens it should comprise “ ‘*the English subjects*’ [comprehension, oral and written expression] *together with History, Geography, English Literature and Scripture*”; each subject should have parity within a balanced curriculum, with an emphasis on their utility for the less able pupils, Norwood, in contrast, criticised the notion of separate subjects because they resulted in “*extreme specialisation and neglect of common ground*” (McCulloch 1994: 123). For him the objective of secondary education was the training of grammar-school pupils in clear thinking and the use of English. He set out his opposition to single subject examinations in a pamphlet:

And there is also the anxiety, the incessant drive which comes from the knowledge that business houses will use the number of credits more and more as a test of comparative merit, so that education becomes more and more a struggle for a five or six credit certificate, is thought of in terms of separate and unrelated subjects, and is less and less thought of as the training of a complete person, physically, mentally and morally, for the chances and changes of the modern life and for the carrying out in an intelligent and responsible manner of

the duties of citizenship which will, as we are at present governed, infallibly fall upon every one of these boys and girls within a few years.

(Norwood undated: 4)

In regard to external examinations, Norwood had very strong views. He was conscious of *“the sort of harm that the examinations system is doing, since the questions which is asked in not how best to equip for life and the demands of life, but how best to pass the examination”* (Norwood undated: 4). He was an advocate of what is now termed ‘formative assessment’. Norwood’s argument *“stressed two central issues: the guidance of the child, and the freedom of the teacher”* (McCulloch 1994: 138). The Norwood report implies that it was this concern for pupils’ best interests that lay behind his antipathy to what he saw as the negative influence of the university examining boards on the grammar-school curriculum. Certainly McCulloch feel that Norwood’s model:

...asserted in the strongest terms teachers’ own professional responsibility in the domain of examinations and assessment, against what was later to emerge as the ‘market’ view of the accountability of teachers and schools to ‘the public’ for the outcomes of public examinations.

(McCulloch 1994: 138)

During an interview, Peter Gosden suggested other motives. He believes that Norwood saw an opportunity to extricate private school pupils from what he saw as the stranglehold of the Boards’ School Certificates. Gosden described Norwood’s attitude as, *“Why should ‘our people’ have the same certificates as everyone else?”* (Gosden 2000). Presumably Norwood recognised the value that the ‘branding’ of a private school would provide to school-produced assessments. Whatever his motives, and despite his role as chairman of the SSEC implying support for examinations, Norwood’s report recommended the phasing out of external examinations, except for university entrance, over seven years. Instead, schools would produce what might be termed a ‘profile’ of pupils which would provide a more individual version of an

individual's attainment. Examinations in individual subjects would serve as a short-term measure to allow time for the new internal assessment system to take shape. It was by this means that a central objective of the well-known Norwood report was definitively lost as examinations flourished as never before, while the largely forgotten Spens' promotion of examinations in single subjects has become an essential feature of English education. The single-subject structure of English qualifications, now deeply embedded, sets them apart from virtually all other comparable national systems. This could well be the most significant, though unintended, result of the Norwood Report and the 1944 Act.

Neither report had touched on the issue of private schools. Norwood, as a former headmaster of Harrow, had a keen interest in the matter, but had agreed with Butler's request to restrict his committee's focus to "*the scope of Grammar Schools in the wider field of Secondary Education*" (McCulloch 1994: 120). This concession on Norwood's part "*ensured that discussion would continue to be framed generally in terms of grammar, technical and modern schools: that is in a tripartite pattern of [state] provision*" (McCulloch 1994: 120).

It was in 1941 that R A Butler became President of the Board of Education in Churchill's coalition Government and set in motion his plan to bring about the long-delayed reform of secondary education. To head the committee which would produce a report on which to base a bill, Butler appointed Sir Cyril Norwood, a long-serving headmaster⁴ and chairman of the Secondary Schools Examinations Council, from which most other members of the committee were also drawn (McCulloch 1994: 119). This choice of what was effectively a sub-committee of the SSEC led the examining boards as the dominant group in that body to expect to receive the eventual

report. When in the event they were completely bypassed, their consternation was understandable.

The Norwood committee was not given *carte blanche*, but – prompted by his parliamentary secretary, the educationist Chuter Ede, a Labour MP – Butler tabled the 1938 Spens Report as a starting point. This is a clear indication that there existed a form of political consensus around the three-level structure. After deliberating for two years, the Norwood committee completed its report in 1943 and sent it directly to Butler as President of the Board of Education, circumventing any input from the SSEC on the proposals which had major significance for the examinations they controlled. An official from the Cambridge board suggested that a reason for this slight might be that “...*the complete cessation of the activities of the Secondary Schools Examinations Council during the war may be an indication of its unsatisfactory constitution*” (Brereton 1944: 170). He did not elucidate the nature of this unsatisfactoriness. A later suggestion was that “*the boards were seen as too defensive, so their bypassing by Norwood was not all that surprising*” (Gosden 2000).

No such anodyne explanations for this inexcusable treatment came from the Joint Matriculation Board. In his history of that organisation written after time might have cooled his emotions, James Petch described the bypassing of the Boards as “*official chicanery*” (Petch 1953: 165). However it might be said that this pique at a perceived insult was misdirected, for the report effectively recommended their eventual demise: the Norwood report recommended the phasing out of external examinations.

The Norwood Report and the subsequent Butler Education Act have regularly been blamed for their elitist restriction of examinations to pupils in grammar schools. In

fact, although their chairman might have felt differently, their motives were based on concern for those pupils of a weaker academic standard:

The majority of members of the SSEC certainly wished modern and technical schools to remain free from any external examinations because of the constraints which these placed on the curricula of schools. So far as the LEAs were concerned, this feeling was reinforced by the apparent jealousy which some of them had shown between the wars towards the influence of university examining bodies on the curricula of 'their' secondary schools.
(Gosden 1983: 63)

Certainly Sir Cyril felt that the curricular constraints imposed by the School Certificates should not be allowed to blight the new technical and modern schools, and his report recommended that examinations should become “...entirely internal, that is to say, conducted by the teachers at the school on syllabuses and papers framed by themselves” (SSEC 1943: 140). This was to be virtually the precise design of the Certificate of Secondary Education which was introduced in 1965, but it won no support in 1944. The Boards were, naturally, opposed to this recommendation for their gradual disappearance. One of their number felt that implementing it could prove to be “...a step which I believe would allow arbitrariness, favouritism and patronage to raise their ugly heads again...” (Brereton 1944: 187). In fact, Brereton included in his 1944 *Case for Examinations*, perhaps too late to have any influence, an enlightened proposal for a move to a regional system in which:

...the existing examination bodies should pool their resources more completely with the agreed object of making it easy for schools to transfer from one examination to another nearer at hand [with a]...Curriculum and Examinations Council to co-ordinate the examinations...and act as a link between these [regional examining] bodies and the Board of Education.
(Brereton 1944: 189)

However, as has always been the case, the Boards' thinking was not taken into account. While they have been trusted to administer the system and the qualifications they provide have become deeply rooted in the educational structure, their experience has not been deemed relevant when reforms are being designed: another feature of

English practice which this study contends has had and continues to have serious consequences.

Having examined contemporary issues of the *Times Educational Supplement*, I have found no evidence of any concern about the proposed abolition of examinations. This lack of reaction is likely due not to support for the idea but to greater concern at the time over a more immediate issue: the omission of any mention of the public schools, as discussed in the prologue to this chapter. With that aspect of “*the contestation that underlay the settlement of 1944*” (McCulloch 1994: 116) safely sidelined, Butler had to deal with the knotty problem of interdenominational sensitivities which had stalled previous attempts at reform. As discussed above, he managed to reassure both sides of the debate by inventing a hybrid system of state and church secondary schools.

A last look at the Norwood Report reveals that its unintended consequences were far more lasting than any of its principal recommendations. The three-level secondary structure gradually gave way to a comprehensive system from the mid-1960s. Yet by conceding that the grouped School Certificates be replaced with single-subject examinations, Sir Cyril achieved exactly the reverse of his objective. English students now regard it as their fundamental right to select the subjects that they will study. Attempts to encourage a broad post-16 curriculum with a wider element of general education have proved singularly unsuccessful. Above all, far from withering away as Norwood had intended, external examinations have become embedded in the structure of English education, and continue to exert a powerful influence over young people’s future pathways.

The Act, the Minister and a first move towards central control of the Boards

Whatever its faults, the Butler Education Act at least introduced free secondary education in England for all pupils to age 15 in one of three types of school. It also resolved at least partially the thorny problem of church involvement in state education. Its sweeping changes meant that drawing up the necessary regulations took civil servants some months. By the time they had produced Circular 103 containing the principal regulations, a general election had brought in Atlee's Labour Government with Ellen Wilkinson as Minister of Education – for the Board had been upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry, with its Minister a member of the Cabinet. Yet this change in political complexion did not affect the implementation of the Education Act.

The new Minister defended the proposals at the Labour Party conference in the autumn of 1945 and Circular 103 came into effect in May 1946. This episode was cited by Denis Lawton, as mentioned above, as evidence for his claim of the growing power of civil servants in the education department. Ellen Wilkinson has suffered much posthumous criticism for her failure to introduce a comprehensive system and for restricting examinations to grammar-school pupils. Such claims overlook the issues that were in the foreground at the time. As has been stressed, when analysing policy developments with hindsight, it is important to be aware of the pressures at the time which might have obscured issues that loom larger at a later date. In Wilkinson's case, her overriding objective was to ensure the establishment of free secondary education for all and to raise the leaving age to 15. Any flaws in the proposed triple-

track system were of less consequence. Even the historian who has deplored the failure of the Atlee government to move to a fully comprehensive system has acknowledged that a key issue prior to the 1944 Act was:

...the fight for a single or common code of regulations for all schools catering for children over the age of eleven. It is, perhaps, difficult to recognise the significance of this demand today since it is now, after nearly fifty years, so much taken for granted.

(Simon 1991: 76)

As an able child of the Manchester working class, Wilkinson was well aware of the opportunities her grammar school education had opened for her. Privately, she did indeed have reservations about the divided system:

Although she eventually approved the Ministry Circular (73) commending the tripartite secondary organisation to local authorities, she railed against it in her diary. What it meant was: 'give the real stuff to 25 percent, steer the 75 percent away from the humanities, pure science, even history.'

(Quoted in Vernon 1982: 222-3)

While Ellen Wilkinson was constrained by political realities, she was not alone in concentrating on one issue while neglecting other effects of the 1944 Act. The teaching world was very exercised over two aspects of Regulation 103 concerning examinations, and seemed to overlook what was the highly significant shift from a grouped to a single-subject system. Many years later, Denis Lawton commented:

It is interesting to note that most of the controversy about the new structure concerned the age limit rather than the major departure from the traditional group certificate.

(Lawton 1980: 96)

The controversial Regulation prevented pupils other than those at grammar schools from entering examinations before age 17. The new scheme thus at a stroke excluded all those in the new 'modern' schools, who left at 15. Brian Simon, for one, interpreted this as yet another instance of:

...the highly systematic and determined approach by ministry officials. ...By erecting this barrier [to equal status for all three types of school] in this manner

and at this particular point in time, the government perpetuated in a new form the old separation between elementary and secondary schools.
(Simon 1991: 115)

While that may have been the effect, it was not, as has been shown above, necessarily the objective. The other issue stirred by the new Regulations was the concern among grammar schools over a perceived threat to their pupils' pass rates. The new examination was to have a 'pass' set at the standard of a School Certificate 'credit'; this meant that many would fail the new examination. The issue was the subject of widespread debate. The *Times Educational Supplement* claimed that "*it was a political and not an educational argument*" (Quoted in Simon 1991: 114). This distinction strikes an unexpected note from the perspective of the 21st century, where all educational arguments have become political.

Because of these concerns, it seemed that virtually no one except the examining boards took particular note of the final clause of Circular 113, issued in June 1946. This announced that the Minister was assuming full responsibility "*for the direction of policy and general arrangements in regard to school examinations*". Because of "*new statutory duties imposed on her under the Education Act, 1944, the Minister is no longer justified in limiting her functions to those of a Co-ordinating Authority*" (Quoted in Simon 1991: 112). This signalled a significant shift in the balance of power from the Boards to the centre, yet there was virtually no contemporary comment on the development. Thirty years later, Gosden's analysis detected indications of a climate fostering such a shift within the ranks of Board of Education staff prior to the 1944 Act:

The acceptance by the senior staff of the Board of the idea of leading rather than merely advising and watching was both a reversion to the attitude adopted in the early years of the century at the time of Morant, and a harbinger of the greatly increased powers to be conferred on the minister of education in the Act of 1944.

(Gosden 1976: 238)

Certainly the examining boards interpreted the change as the flexing of muscles by the newly promoted Ministry. James Petch observed that:

When working on the 1918 scheme [School & Higher School Certificates], the Board of Education had asked the existing university examining bodies for their help and had benefited from their experience. The prestige of the universities and their examining bodies was then needed by Whitehall. In deciding what the 1951 scheme was to be the Ministry of Education chose to pay little attention to the universities and to ignore completely the examining bodies.

(Petch 1953: 163)

While James Petch can in no way be considered an objective witness, he had been long involved in the management of the Joint Matriculation Board, so his perceptions are based on experience. He was unequivocal in his view that the shift in control was far from being purely symbolic:

The outstanding difference between the new examination and its predecessors is the amount of control over it which is being exercised from the centre. Circular 113 announced the Ministerial intention of taking charge and charge has been taken.

(Petch 1953: 163)

As well as wounded pride, the Boards had professional reasons for objecting to their exclusion in designing the new examinations. Their experience had taught them that:

...the precipitate changes in the nature of school examinations did not allow sufficient time to consider the adequacy for the new purpose of the measuring device hitherto used. A separate subject examination calls for greater precision of measurement than was satisfactory for a certificate examination....

(Petch 1953: 213)

This was the first indication of what was to be a corollary of the shift to central control: a failure to appreciate the intricacies of the assessment devices which the Boards had developed.

Ellen Wilkinson did not have the opportunity to exercise her new authority because she died suddenly just eight months after the publication of Regulation 113. Nevertheless, the shift in control proceeded. It was effected through a restructuring of

the Secondary Schools Examinations Council. Where previously the Board of Education had provided only the Council's chairman and secretary, the Ministry would now nominate five of its own representatives as participating members. Local Authority representation was also increased. However the ten representatives of the examining boards were replaced by five representatives from universities rather than from their examining boards. [See **Figure 3.3**] This new configuration was responsible for drawing up plans for the new examination that would replace the School Certificates; the professionals had been dismissed and the design was left to the amateurs. This failure to appreciate the expertise the examining boards had developed has persisted and was, I shall suggest, a contributory factor in the crisis over grades in September 2002, to be considered in Chapter Five. Although the Boards have subsequently been held responsible for flaws in the new examinations, they had no part in their overall design. *"Like the other seven approved examining boards, the Board [JMB] had no part in designing the Examinations for the GCE"* (Petch 1953: 177). This information casts rather a different light on McCulloch's charge that the examining boards *"succeeded in their propaganda war to the extent that they helped to undermine the reputation of the Report, and of Norwood himself, in the years following the war"* (McCulloch 1994: 141).

Figure 3-3 Post-1946 Changes to SSEC

SSEC 1918-1946	SSEC from June 1946
10 from University Examining Boards	6 from Universities (not necessarily Boards)
10 from Local Authorities	8 from Local Authorities
10 teachers	11 teachers

	5 from the Ministry
	1 from Wales

Such a judgement seems harsh in view of the Boards' treatment firstly by Norwood and then by the Ministry.

The General Certificate of Education: not general and not for all

In her deft survey of qualifications and assessment in the 20th century, Alison Wolf described the General Certificate of Education (GCE) as “*designed entirely by the Secondary School Examinations Council and delivered to the examination boards (and universities) as a fait accompli*” (Wolf 2002a: 214). The term ‘design’ flatters what was produced in September 1947 by the newly reconstituted Secondary Schools Examinations Council. Brian Simon described it thus:

This turned out to be a curt and extremely unrevealing document, defining the character of the proposed new examination – the General Certificate of Education (GCE).
(Simon 1991: 112)

Although excluded from the design stage of the new examination, the Boards were left to cope with some of the flaws in that design. A major one of these was the introduction of powerful subject panels with specialist knowledge. Contrary to popular belief, knowing a subject does not always translate into understanding effective means of assessing that subject. The specialists were frequently experienced at university level rather than at the secondary level of the examinations they were considering. Writing just after the new system had taken shape, James Petch articulated the Boards' frustration at yet another instance of their expertise being overlooked:

In its subject panels the S.S.E.C. has devised an arrangement which allows the group of three or four individuals which deals with each subject to indicate ex cathedra their disapproval of syllabuses, question-papers and methods of marking. Inevitably their criticisms are founded on a narrower experience than that out of which have grown the syllabuses, question-papers and methods they criticise, and much energy is devoted to attempts to enforce an undesirable uniformity of detail. What may have still more serious repercussions is that subject panels can be stamping grounds for individualistic specialists where each 'subject' is considered without much regard to its place in the curriculum as a whole.

(Petch 1953: 174)

This observation could well have been written in the mid-1980s, when a virtually identical process took place during the creation of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) which replaced the GCE Ordinary level. Despite their long years of successful performance, the Boards are not trusted when it comes to planning change.

The new examination was rolled out in successive stages: the Ordinary level for 16-year-olds in 1951 and the Advanced level for 18-year-olds in 1953. As mentioned above, entry to the examinations was restricted to the 20 per cent of pupils selected for the grammar schools. Yet with secondary education now open to all, post-war English society expected the attainments of all to be accredited. Pressure for change began almost immediately.

An early attempt to respond to this pressure was to widen access to examination success by creating a different type of examining board. This was the idea not of the established university-based Boards, but of the East Midlands Union, one of four regional bodies which accredited attainment in technical subjects. They proposed to the Secondary Schools Examinations Council that, with technical schools now forming a substantial segment of the new secondary structure, "*it would be beneficial*

to have at least one examining body which was not directly coupled with a university”(Earnshaw 1974: 1)

The idea developed and was eventually discussed at the Ministry of Education in March 1949. Among those in attendance were “...*four members of the Secondary Schools Examinations Council, ...as well as the Ministry officers and the Union representatives*” (Earnshaw 1974: 2). Not included was any representative from an existing examining board. Once again in English educational policy making, the only people with real experience of examining were not involved at an early stage. Although this might be explained by the focus in this case being on examinations in technical and commercial subjects where the existing Boards were not experienced, it soon became clear that the proposed new Board was to have a wider remit:

The SSEC and the Ministry representatives thought that if a ninth examining body was set up, it should not be restricted to technical subjects, but should provide syllabuses and examinations in general subjects also designed for Secondary Technical pupils, part-time students, and later for County College [Further Education] students.
(Earnshaw 1974: 2)

Here was clear evidence that the Ministry, with its new influence within the SSEC, was minded to take an active role in developments within the examining world.

A working party was set up to develop the idea. This comprised representatives of the regional technical bodies, augmented by the City & Guilds Institute, the Royal Society of Arts and the London Chamber of Commerce – all with an established interest in assessment of applied skills. After discussions over the course of a year, the SSEC recommended to the Minister of Education on 16 March 1950 that a ninth⁵ examining body be approved in principle. It was not until April that “*the Council sent out a letter to the eight university boards asking for their concurrence, co-operation in this project, and their comments on the draft statement...*” (Earnshaw 1974: 4).

When one considers that at that point the Boards were fully occupied in managing the final series of the School Certificate examinations while simultaneously working on drawing up the new GCE to whose design they had not been invited to contribute, their lukewarm response to the news of a government-endorsed competitor is not surprising.

Earnshaw listed their various objections. The London board raised the question of the acceptability of the proposed new body's results for university entrance; Durham feared that the new Board would "*cause the GCE to be sharply split into two types depending not on ability...but on the place of origin of the candidate viz., Grammar School or Secondary Technical School.*" Cambridge felt that "*cooperation among existing boards and the technical examining bodies provided a more promising approach*" (Earnshaw 1974: 4-5). Innocent at that time of the realities of the market, the Boards did not explicitly raise the real problem with an additional Board: the number of candidates was fixed, and there was no way that they could, to use the modern idiom 'grow their business'. This issue lay dormant, hidden by the increasing numbers of students that schools were entering for examination, until the 1980s, when the limited size of the market translated into financial pressure on some Boards.

Meanwhile the momentum for a new Board continued. City & Guilds agreed to finance and service the 'ninth board', and on 8 May 1952 the Joint Examinations Board for the General Certificate of Education came into being. The Ministry immediately insisted on a name change as there were already two 'joint' boards; instead it became the Associated Examining Board (AEB).

This was to be the only adjustment to the structure of qualification providers, with no corresponding change in those qualifications, following the entry of a huge new

population of young people into secondary education. Even widening the ability range accredited by examination had to wait a further 15 years.

At the outset, the new Board did provide a less traditional approach to examining for the technical sector for which it had been created. A long-serving official of that Board recalls:

...in the very early years of the AEB's existence, ie 1955 onwards for about ten years, AEB GCE's were fairly popular in the secondary technical schools. ...And there is no doubt that the AEB was very successful in developing (i) syllabuses in traditional subjects but with a vocational bias, and (ii) syllabuses in new technical subjects which had not been included in the GCE subject range hitherto (eg Plastering, Surveying, Carpentry & Joinery, Craftwork: Wood or Metal and so on).

(AEB, 2004)

Although full data from the early years are not accessible, some information does exist about the profile of candidate in 1955, the AEB's first year of operation:

2 409 candidates from 151 centres:

- 60 FE and Technical Colleges

- 43 Secondary Modern Schools

- 37 Secondary Technical Schools

Most popular subjects after English Language & Mathematics:

Geometrical Drawing (233 candidates)

Art (192 candidates)

Building Construction (186 candidates)

(AEB, 2004)

Certainly some schools appreciated the appropriate syllabuses and examinations that an innovative examining board was able to provide for their pupils. The same AEB official recalls in particular the “...head-teacher of Portsmouth Secondary Technical School during the 1960s emphasising to me that the AEB's particular mix of academic and technical approaches had proved a real lifeline for the technical schools while they lasted.” Then the head-teacher of Holland Park, one of London's showpiece comprehensive schools, “used to say that one of the real bright spots in life was the marvellous suitability of many of the AEB's new syllabuses for his less

academic pupils.” Further Education colleges were the main beneficiaries of the AEB’s non-traditional syllabuses, “*a partnership which was to strengthen rapidly and indeed last till the present day*” (AEB, 2004)

However, the technical schools never became firmly established on a national basis – partly because of post-war financial stringency, partly because of the English distaste for applied education and partly because of the growing movement for comprehensive schools. The new examining board grew increasingly indistinguishable from the others. Yet at the same time there was growing pressure for more young people to be accredited through external examinations. The Norwood Committee’s expectation that external examinations would wither had misjudged completely the national trend. In fact the opposite had happened, and schools which entered pupils for external examinations were seen to:

... ‘derive substantial public esteem as a result, and indeed the teaching staff in such schools tend to argue that the examinations are desirable rather than undesirable.’; from a Memorandum of observations for submission to the Minister of Education, 22 December 1955.
(Quoted in Gosden 1983: 68)

Instead, qualifications were becoming increasingly important currency in English society. One writer commenting on this aspect of the English social climate refers to:

...the power of ‘credentialism’ – the expectation that what pupils learnt at school would be authenticated by some external certification, and that this, whether relevant or not, could then be used as a discriminatory instrument for recruitment.
(Maclure 2000: 56)

Certainly teachers were increasingly uncomfortable in following a syllabus designed to select the potential academic elite and simply watered down in secondary modern schools. Before the end of the new examinations’ first decade, the Central Advisory Council for Education (England), which was primarily interested in secondary school

organisation, produced *15-18* (The Crowther Report) in 1959. It found that, although a large section of the school population was “*missing out on any suitable provision*” (Bush 1993: 11), the Advanced level examinations were fit for purpose because “*able students were ‘subject minded’*” (Quoted in Young and Leney 1997: 46). The Crowther Report confirmed that the pressure point in the system was felt most acutely at 16+. It was the growing demand from schools for some form of validation for the attainment of those 16-year-olds who were missing out that led to a series of steps towards widening access. In the first of these, the examining boards were to have only an administrative role in a new qualification which grew out of newly recognised teacher power.

B A golden age for educationists but not for pupils

The 1960s and early 1970s are widely viewed as a golden age in English education: Peter Gosden, Desmond Nuttall, Denis Lawton, Stuart Maclure and Gary McCulloch have all described this period as gilded in one way or another. Lawton, who saw the gilt in teacher control of the curriculum, cites also the view of Maurice Kogan, in 1978 a civil servant at the Department of Education and Science working in the Curriculum Study Group. Kogan attributed nostalgia for the period between 1944 and the beginning of the 1960s to the fact that it was “*the period of optimism and consensus in education: both political parties (Labour and Conservative) were committed to educational expansion...*” (Quoted in Lawton 1980: 22). This has led to the period sometimes being derided as ‘butskillism’ because so little separated the policies of the Conservative R A Butler and Labour’s Hugh Gaitskill. Future analysts may detect a similar blurring of party lines in these early years of the 21st century,

when increasing the powers of the “*managerial state*” has been at the basis of policy for both major parties.

While the 1960s and 70s saw teacher unions and local authorities in the ascendant, with freedom for teachers to experiment, it was certainly not a shining example in opening opportunities to a wider range of young people. Although a series of qualification reforms was proposed, only the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), the first of them, came to fruition – and that one merely accredited attainment. It never achieved the recognition needed to open progression routes. Educationists who look back to the ‘golden age’ overlook the fact that for the majority of English young people it was a time when they were written off by a qualifications system designed for the top 20%.

For the examining boards, it may seem in retrospect to have been a sort of golden age because they were largely left to proceed with business as usual. An opposing view could see it as a period of stagnation, when they ticked over without producing any creative solutions to the problem of opening access to a significantly wider range of young people. This may not have been entirely because of their complacency. In the series of reforms that were designed to address the post-16 qualification problem, the Boards were never involved in the process. Their status as an essential element within the “*education state*” which was not valued for professional expertise continued as before despite the democratic nature of this golden age.

The Certificate of Secondary Education: New Boards as quality control

The first step in opening English qualifications to a wider range of young people occurred almost ‘beneath the radar’ of the examining boards. The new qualification’s design, administration and assessment was in the hands of teachers and local education authorities.

Pressure for wider access to accreditation through public examinations came from “‘outside sources’ – parents, some schools, some teachers, employers – and in the face of strong opposition from the Ministry and the Inspectorate” (Gosden 1983: 75). One man recognised that addressing this demand could provide the perfect opportunity for local education authorities and teachers to win some control over the curriculum from the examining boards. Sir William Alexander was chairman of and the moving spirit behind the Association of [Local Authority] Education Committees. As one of their representatives on the Secondary Schools Examinations Council, he suggested Surrey’s Chief Education Officer, Robert Beloe, to head the sub-committee which the SSEC was setting up to advise on a possible way of widening access to accreditation of attainment at 16. As Alexander had planned, the Beloe Committee recommended the creation of a new Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) to accredit the attainment of the *tranche* of 40% of pupils for whom the GCE Ordinary Level was out of reach. In March 1961, the SSEC advised Edward Boyle, the Conservative Education Minister, to accept the Beloe Report’s proposal. Gosden suggests that this ‘U-turn’ resulted from a recognition that:

...examinations, provided by independent examining bodies, had, despite official discouragement, grown so rapidly that there was serious danger of the curriculum and teaching in the schools coming under external control and that after another five years the minister would probably find himself faced with a situation much more difficult to remedy.
(Gosden 1983: 72)

The new qualification was introduced in 1965. Responsibility for creating the courses and assessing them lay with Local Education Authorities and their teachers through a network of 14 Regional Examining Boards defined by geographical area, funded by the LEA and under the broad supervision of a CSE Committee of the Schools Council. The established examining boards were not involved. They were initially worried that this new qualification would threaten their existing provision. The Associated Examining Board was particularly vulnerable in this respect because a large part of its entry came from the non-selective schools who would eagerly take up CSEs. However such early fears were soon relieved because the GCE O level retained its allure: *“For pupils, parents and employers GCE was more readily accepted as a qualification than CSE”* (Earnshaw 1974: 30). In fact, those pupils who attained good results at CSE often joined the sixth form for a year to try to upgrade to O level. They were rarely successful, a fact which fuelled the pressure for reform of sixth-form provision.

Not only did CSE fail to threaten the providers of GCE; it enabled the established Boards to consolidate their financial position. As the least financially secure, the Associated Examining Board was able at last to acquire financial stability after the introduction of CSE:

The CSE Boards decided on a scale of fees considerably higher than those charged by GCE Boards whilst inevitably providing at this early stage in their development a restricted range of syllabuses. By comparison GCE examinations offered very good value indeed, and the Board were able to raise their fees appreciably without incurring opposition. In the case of the AEB the rise in fees and the increase in entries transformed the financial position within one year, changing an estimated deficit of £11 500 to a surplus of almost £50 000. (Earnshaw 1974: 30)

This is clear evidence that the Schools Council, like its predecessor the Secondary Schools Examinations Committee, took no interest in examination fees. All

examining boards remained entirely independent in this respect. It is at the very least an anomaly, in an education service which has always been hard-pressed for funds, that this remains the case (AQA3 2005).

The new qualification did provide significant autonomy for the teachers involved in devising the internally-assessed Mode 3 syllabuses, and it did endorse the attainment of many more young people. However, one analyst attributes its failure to achieve widespread acceptance to the fact that it did not fit:

...the dominant method of examining English school leavers in the twentieth century [which] had entailed the use of externally devised syllabuses and unseen examination papers, set and marked by examiners employed by university-based boards who had no part in teaching the candidates.
(Whitty 1985: 128)

Certainly cultural expectations about a qualification are of critical importance. Whitty's neo-marxist analysis goes on to ascribe the eventual decline of the CSE to the examining boards' perception of the teacher-controlled qualification as a threat to their power. Unfortunately, by using the phrase "*examining boards*" his critique fails to distinguish between the CSE boards and the GCE boards: the latter did not in fact exercise significant power over CSE. He sees the Boards as traditional agencies who "*tended to employ administrative devices as a way of restricting the growth of new and disparate Mode 3 schemes*" (Whitty 1985: 127). This could not apply to CSE, as revealed by an extract from a Schools Council Examinations Bulletin of 1976:

At present the two types of boards have very different degrees of control over Mode 3. On the one hand the GCE boards are able to control content and means of assessment of a [GCE] Mode 3, with total power to accept or reject a scheme; on the other hand, the CSE boards have virtually no power to reject a scheme which is correctly titled and capable of being assessed and moderated.
(Quoted in Spencer 2003: 125)

The Boards' role in restricting the growth of Mode 3 [*ie* teacher devised] O levels can perhaps be interpreted differently if one takes account of their responsibility for

ensuring the validity, reliability and comparability of the grades produced through these disparate schemes. A consequence of the lack of such control over CSE Mode 3s is expressed by an assessment expert who observed in a recent interview that the freedom of teachers to create exciting new schemes was linked to the qualification's lack of recognition:

I know people sort of witter on about the golden age of CSE and Mode 3 syllabuses.... I read that, but that was because nobody really cared about CSE anyway, so you could try any old thing. But – it's the same fate as GNVQ: as soon as it becomes important you have to tighten up on it, and tighten up means you lose much of what made it attractive in the first place.
(QCA3 2004)

Whitty does concede that “*there were also doubts about the quality and comparability of many Mode 3 schemes in relation to Mode 1s*” (Whitty 1985: 128), but does not acknowledge that the real chasm in public perception as to validity, reliability and comparability existed between CSE of whatever mode and O level. As well as the above evidence from the Associated Examining Board that, far from being a threat, the CSE enhanced the value of GCE qualifications, there are other possible reasons for the CSE's decline.

Although Whitty's analysis would probably characterise me as an “*institutionalized teacher within the board structure*” (Whitty 1985: 128), I suggest an alternative critique of CSE from the perspective of a teacher attempting to find a motivating yet attainable goal for the new range of pupils staying on at school following the raising of the leaving age to 16 in 1974. The initial enthusiastic adoption of the CSE may have been due less to the professional autonomy it offered than to its answering an urgent need. I contend that a major element in teachers' eventual disillusionment with CSE derived from their dissatisfaction with the negative effects of having to divide pupils aged 14 into ‘O-level sheep’ and ‘CSE goats’. With parental concern that the

CSE was a second-class qualification of no value in progression either to further education or to employment, the essential public support was lacking. CSE did not take root in England's culture. Had it been conceived with the *imprimatur* of the established examining boards, its fate might have been different. Certainly, in response to a similar wish to enhance the status of vocational qualifications during the 1990s, those Boards were seen by Lord Dearing as able to confer such status.

With CSE placing an unprecedented level of control with teachers and local authorities, a second recommendation of the Beloe Report seemed to counteract the prevailing democratising trend and met a distinctly hostile reception. The Ministry agreed with the report's suggestion that the Secondary Schools Examinations Council "*needed the assistance of a small but highly qualified professional team to study in depth the problems posed by the introduction of a new system of national examinations*" (Gosden 1983: 75). Gosden attributes this development to English ministers' growing awareness of the international interest in curriculum matters. At meetings such as those of the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), they "*could do little more than incant the doctrine that in Britain the teacher was a law unto himself*" (Gosden 1983: 76).

A new Minister, David Eccles, attempted to reassure teachers and local education authorities that there would be no threat to existing powers resulting from his proposal to create within the ministry a Curriculum Study Group. His soothing words had little effect, for "*the response from the education service was almost unanimous opposition*." (Gosden 1983: 76). The Government, still retaining remnants of the view that curriculum matters were not the business of government despite its growing interest in what Eccles described as a "*secret garden*", sidelined the Curriculum Study

Group to continue quietly within the Department of Education and Science. Then it replaced the Secondary Schools Examinations Council with an entirely different form of regulatory body: the Schools Council for Curriculum and Examinations, which first met in October of 1964. (Barber 1992: 39) The examining boards were not invited to join.

The Schools Council: Innovative but ineffectual in examination reform

The Schools Council ushered in twenty years of teacher-led innovation in curriculum and pedagogy but its repeated efforts at examination reform bore no fruit. Like its predecessor, the SSEC, it did not include in its Council or any of its numerous committees any representatives of the examining boards. I believe there was a connection between these two facts.

Looking back at that period from the current situation of strong central control, it is difficult to credit statements like that of Michael Young in 1971:

What is significant for the sociology of education is that in spite of attempts, the politics of the curriculum has remained outside Westminster. Apart from compulsory religious instruction, the headmaster or principal's formal autonomy over the curriculum is not questioned.
(Young 1971: 22)

The succeeding 25 years have seen a revolution in control of education in England – a revolution that has affected the examining boards in perhaps less obvious ways than it has the autonomy of head teachers. Young does qualify his statement by pointing to the *de facto* limitation on that autonomy due to the universities' domination of “*all but one of the examining boards*” (Young 1971: 22).

Certainly the Schools Council did not impinge on anyone's autonomy. The central principle of its constitution once again makes unusual reading from a vantage point thirty years on, when the “*managerial state*” has taken on so many of these responsibilities:

...each school should have the fullest possible measure of responsibility for its own work, with its own curriculum and teaching methods based on the needs of its own pupils and evolved by its own staff.
(Quoted in Plaskow 1985: 4)

As regards its links with the examining boards, the Schools Council fulfilled its responsibilities over examinations in a minimalist form of regulation. A QCA official who had been a professional officer with the Schools Council recalls the very light touch it exercised:

Schools Council regulated, of course. It was done through A-level syllabus approval and scrutiny, wasn't it? And it wasn't done at 16 [O-level]...simply because the Council didn't feel it had the resources to do a job of that size. It was partly that, I think, and if it had to make a choice it would clearly have gone for A level because A level was more to do with life chances. Yes, A-level scrutiny in Schools Council days was a voluntary activity. The boards saw it presumably as in their interest to have an external view of what they did. It was never really contentious. Actually, there's one thing that isn't there [now] that I didn't mention earlier and that's the secrecy issue. That was always a private business between the Schools Council and the boards, when we sent our reports to the boards alone: nothing public about them. And it was all done in a very... what's the non-sexist term? Oh, 'civilised', I suppose – I was going to say 'gentlemanly' – civilised way in that we sent these reports with recommendations and the boards were sort of trusted to get on with it, weren't they? There was no really hard-edged follow-up.
(QCA2 2003)

This long excerpt has been quoted in full to provide a rare insight into the spirit of regulation in the days of the Schools Council. This will be contrasted with subsequent shifts to strong central control. There is no question that the regulatory agency in today's “*managerial state*” would now tolerate regulation based on ‘suggestions’ and ‘trust’; the regulatory powers now have fully statutory status.

While I suggest that the omission of any representatives from the examining boards may have contributed to the failure of Schools Council examination reforms to get off the ground, another possible contributory factor lies in the procedures of what its historian describes as “*an untidily democratic institution*” (Plaskow 1985: 4).

The Schools Council attracted a number of charismatic individuals to lead its frequently imaginative curriculum projects. However, even its defenders admit that its procedures were “*heavily bureaucratic and arcane*”, with proposers of papers sometimes having to endure eighteen months “*as papers trundled through committees*”. It was not unknown for proposers to appear and argue their case before six different groups, “*all of whom then expressed a view to Programme Committee, who gave the final verdict*” (Plaskow 1985: 4).

Another analyst suggests that, rather than bureaucracy, it is probable that the Schools Council’s principal virtue was also its fatal flaw:

The Schools Council had no power to make any change; it was non-prescriptive. It could survey the scene, consider the possibilities and make enquiries into them, make recommendations and seek to persuade people to adopt them. In this sphere [changing the post-16 curriculum and examinations] it did all that could be done in each of these, but did not succeed in the last.
(Jennings 1985: 26)

An account of the abortive series of imaginative but ineffectual proposals for the reform of post-16 qualifications illustrates the weakness in the Schools Council’s voluntarist approach. It also serves as relevant motivation for the education department’s growing tendency for increasing central control. It is salutary to remember that, during the golden age of this “*untidily democratic*” regulator, nothing concrete was achieved in the way of qualification reform.

Because of strong teacher representation – thirty-four out of a Council membership of sixty-four (Gillan 2003: 97) – the Council was aware of the dissatisfaction in sixth

forms with GCE A levels or repeat O levels as the only curriculum option. It established, together with the Standing Committee for University Entrance (SCUE), a working party to draw up an alternative scheme. The outcome was a proposal for a qualifying year (Q) studying five subjects, followed by a further (F) year focusing on the student's chosen special subjects. At the time, this proposal was generally considered far too radical. Its basic structure was to re-emerge in the *Curriculum 2000* reforms thirty years later. A similar plan in 1973 comprised courses at normal (N) and further (F) levels which again failed to win support.

In 1972 the Schools Council produced its most ambitious scheme in this area. The Certificate of Extended Education (CEE) was to provide a qualification at the end of one year's sixth-form study based on core subjects augmented with content relevant to the world of work. It seemed a plausible way forward for institutions attempting to cope with the growing numbers and widening ability range of students staying on in education after 16. Yet despite its answering an obvious need, it was not perceived as the right solution to the growing problems post-16 education faced as a result of social and economic changes.

Firstly, following the raising of the school leaving age to 17 in 1972, schools were primarily concerned with how to cope with a new population for many of whom there was little prospect of examination success. Then the 1973 oil crisis brought about an economic downturn which closed doors to potential employment for these same young people, leaving them with no option but to stay on at school for another year. The CEE seemed a utopian answer to a very down-to-earth problem; it was flawed in that it assumed a higher level of attainment than its potential clientele had achieved.

Local authorities might have been more enthusiastic supporters for the proposals, but following local government reorganisation in January 1974, Gosden points out that they had become politicised as never before. (Gosden 1983: 85) Party political debates in local education committees were not a friendly environment for thoughtful responses to new ideas. Despite lukewarm support, the plan for the CEE was submitted to the Secretary of State in 1976 and received Department of Education and Science support in the form of concrete proposals for such a qualification in the 1979 Keohane Report. Gosden claims that despite this apparent endorsement of the CEE, there were misgivings within the Department. When it came to a difference of opinion between the Department and the Schools Council, there was no question where the power lay. It seemed that the weakness in the proposal centred on the Schools Council's failure to involve the examining boards:

...the Department and HMI [Her Majesty's Inspectorate] have misgivings about its merit [because] ...the Schools Council have not succeeded in demonstrating that the considerable technical difficulties of examining over a wide spectrum of the ability range have been solved. They have not offered an agreed and workable plan for the administration of the proposed new examination by the existing examining bodies.

(Quoted in Gosden 1983: 85)

This rare acknowledgement of the technical difficulties of examining did not, unfortunately, take deep root within the education department. Had it done so, there might have been more effective outcomes subsequently in the cases of both GCSE and *Curriculum 2000*. One can only speculate as to whether the CEE might have survived had the examining boards been included – or at least consulted – by the Schools Council. In the event, the CEE was left to wither on the vine, along with the reputation of the Schools Council. As its influence waned, the Council persevered with addressing post-16 problems and suggested an intermediate (I) level examination between O level and A level. (Plaskow 1985: xii) This too proved fruitless. Despite its

good intentions, the Schools Council achieved nothing by way of post-16 reform. Both CEE and the Intermediate-level examination were terminally scuppered when in 1979, Mark Carlisle as the new Conservative Secretary of State for Education announced, together with his opposite number in Wales, that A levels were to remain unchanged for the foreseeable future.

Although excluded from the Schools Council's schemes, during the 1970s the examining boards themselves attempted to broaden A-level students' intellectual horizons by devising a new A level in General Studies. The syllabus required a knowledge of a range of disciplines, reading comprehension of a foreign language and some mathematics plus the ability to construct an argument in essay form. The most popular General Studies syllabus was that of the Joint Matriculation Board. However even its success was limited because few university admissions tutors apart from the northern five, of which the JMB was the offspring, recognised the subject. Because *"pupils and teachers had to be highly instrumental in their choice of A levels and pursuit of good grades in specialist subjects"* (Mathieson 1992: 191), General Studies failed to gain a wide take-up in the nation's sixth forms. Mathieson cites General Studies as evidence of:

...the low level of everyone's commitment to breadth. ...It had little currency with university admissions tutors, ...little practical support and investment of resources from heads and heads of subject departments and...slight recognition by pupils.
(Mathieson 1992: 191)

This attempt by the Boards to broaden A levels by means of a syllabus proved only marginally more successful than the School's Council's more ambitious schemes.

As for the Schools Council, by the end of the 1970s, as Plaskow points out, there was virtually no significant involvement in its work by representatives of either the

Department of Education and Science or Her Majesty's Inspectorate. (Plaskow 1985: 5) Even early supporters like Sir William Alexander had to acknowledge that Local Education Authorities had not used it effectively as a platform for locally generated reforms. (Gosden 2000) The demise of the Association of Education Committees, which had been Alexander's power base, and the influential LEA voice in the Schools Council "*left the DES seriously weakened in its ability to bring about curriculum reform through co-operation*" (Lowe 1997: 138). As stated above, recognising this dilemma does go some way to explaining the department's quest for greater control in the years to come.

In 1981, Mark Carlisle commissioned a report on the Schools Council from Mrs Nancy Trenaman, Principal of St Anne's College, Oxford. She recommended its continuation with some structural changes. However in 1982 Carlisle was replaced as Secretary of State by Sir Keith Joseph. He announced that the Schools Council would be disbanded. His motives were variously interpreted as a response to the Council's declining effectiveness or, in the view of a London head teacher who had served on the Council, from more malign motives:

Spin of the day talked about teacher unions' dissension. Although NAS and NUT had differences, they were not over the curriculum. It was a determined attempt by Keith Joseph to kill it.
(NUT 2000)

I would suggest that Sir Keith was very probably advised by his civil servants in the education department that a stronger role for the regulator was the only way to achieve real change. Certainly from the perspective of the examining boards, in the series of regulatory bodies that succeeded the Schools Council, the hand of central control weighed increasingly heavily.

The Ruskin speech signals growing government involvement in education across the political spectrum

Just as the ill-fated CEE could symbolise the end of the so-called golden age, the beginning of a very different and less consensual one was signalled in a speech delivered by the Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan at Ruskin College, Oxford, in October of 1976. Its message was significant, but for the purposes of this study its derivation was even more so. The Prime Minister had requested a paper on the whole question of the curriculum followed by schools. The resulting report was produced in the form of a confidential report popularly known as 'The Yellow Book'. *"Its contents represented a DES view which drew heavily on HMP"* (Maclure 2000: 191). Although the full report was never published, the *Times Educational Supplement* of 15 October, 1976 published on its first page extracts from a leaked version, describing it bluntly as *"the Department of Education and Science's proposal that it should have a greater say in deciding the curriculum of Britain's schools."*

Although the criticisms in the Yellow Paper of both curriculum and pedagogy in the nation's schools did not extend to examinations which *"had held up very well"* (Quoted in Maclure 2000: 192), this flexing of DES muscles was a signal that the examining boards' autonomy, together with that of Local Education Authorities and individual schools, would be further challenged. The essential message of Callaghan's speech was that the curriculum was not the sole preserve of education professionals but was a matter of wide concern because England's schools were not adequately preparing young people for employment. In reality, the wider in interest these matters

was coming from the education department, with Her Majesty's Inspectorate not far behind.

The growing ambition of the department was signalled in the final paragraph of the Yellow Book in the form of “*a plea for a more direct mandate to intervene*”:

It will also be good to get on record from Ministers and in particular from the Prime Minister an authoritative pronouncement on the division of responsibility for what goes on in school, suggesting that the Department should give a firmer lead....

(Quoted in Maclure 2000: 194)

Two people writing at the close of the 1970s, Brian Salter and Ted Tapper, suggested that the DES had become an “*ambitious bureaucracy*”. Their analysis found that:

Throughout the 1970s, the DES was engaged on a process of policy enclosure which effectively re-drew the old tripartite partnership of DES, LEAs and teachers' trade unions. As policy making was progressively internalized within the Department's 'rational' planning procedures, the LEAs and teachers' unions were increasingly made aware that they were subordinate, rather than equal partners [as had been the concept in the past].

(Salter and Tapper 1981: 34)

This view has been confirmed variously by Peter Gosden, Denis Lawton, Stuart Maclure and Geoff Whitty and was succinctly summed up by Clive Chitty when looking back from his perspective in 2004. He was clear about the policy implications of the Yellow Paper: “*It ended with a suggestion that the Department should give a firmer lead*” (Chitty 2004: 42).

A quarter-century later, this ambition has been fulfilled. The “*managerial state*” controls and regulates education closely. In the case of the examining boards, they experienced a second major ratcheting-up of this control, tighter than that following the 1944 Act, as the price of the long-sought merging of the divided 16+ system of O levels and CSE into a single examination.

A single examination at 16+ with a step-change in control over the Boards

The change to the 16+ examinations structure was a response to the pressure that had been building up through the gradual change in the structure of the secondary system. Discontent over the socially divisive nature of the three-track secondary structure established by the 1944 Education Act grew as technical schools failed to develop and secondary moderns were evidently an inferior option: even their level of funding was significantly below that of the grammar schools. The all-ability or comprehensive school was widely seen as the fair way forward, and increasing numbers of Local Education Authorities began to reorganise their secondary provision on that model.

Finally the Labour government acceded to the groundswell of pro-comprehensive support and in 1965 Anthony Crosland issued Circular 10/65, which requested – rather than required – Local Authorities to put forward plans for reorganising their secondary provision on comprehensive lines. While its voluntarism disappointed comprehensive advocates, it aroused bitter opposition in some Conservative areas where popular grammar schools were threatened. This issue was identified by one analyst as the point at which “*the educational debate became politicized and embittered in a way that it had not been since the religious controversies of 60 years earlier*” (Sharp 2002: 106).

The importance of the comprehensive issue here, however, was its impact on the examination system. The gradual move toward comprehensive schools during the 1970s meant that most children were now making the transition to secondary school with no test involved. Yet this significant structural change was not reflected by any corresponding change in the examinations system: the divided secondary structure was merely replicated within comprehensive schools. The GCE Ordinary level,

unchanged since its creation in 1951 for the 20% of pupils in grammar schools, was supplemented from 1965 by the Certificate of Secondary Education, intended for the next 40%. Virtually no contemporary comment addressed this arithmetic with its non-recognition of 40% of young people. Adding to the pressure on the secondary system was the raising of the school-leaving age to 16 in 1974. This long-awaited change added to the ever-increasing numbers in secondary schools. Gosden observes: “*In 1945 there were about half a million pupils in secondary schools. Thirty years later there were four million*” (Gosden 1983: 29).

Schools were given grants for building additional accommodation – of a minimal standard – to cater for these extra pupils, but no parallel consideration had been given to a suitably adjusted curriculum and qualification structure. Teachers in comprehensive schools were faced with the impossible task of trying on the one hand to build an educational community which included the whole range of abilities while at the same time dividing the pupils at age 14 into O-level sheep, CSE goats and the ‘non-examination’ rest. The system still reflected its platonic origins, certainly diluted on the surface but essentially having the same effect on those going through it.

Pressure from schools for a common examination at 16 built steadily during the 1970s. Following approval in principle by the Schools Council in 1970, “...*there began one of the largest programmes of feasibility and development studies of a proposed educational innovation ever mounted in England and Wales*” (Nuttall 1984: 167). The examining boards – far from acting, in Whitty’s words, as agencies who “*tended to employ administrative devices as a way of restricting growth of new and disparate Mode 3 schemes*” (Whitty 1985: 127) – produced pilot schemes for a common examination. Their responsibility for ensuring the reliability and validity of

examinations has regularly been interpreted as an unwillingness to consider change. This involvement showed them as flexible although aware of the challenge involved in examining across a wide ability range. The pilot schemes were increasingly popular in schools, particularly in the north. An examining board official recalls that:

By the time GCSE was introduced in 1987, the proportion of students taking the 'pilot' 16+ examinations through either the JMB or the five CSE Boards serving northern LEAs was greater than that taking O levels and CSEs.
(AQA1 2000)

Politicians of either complexion were unwilling to respond to the pressure for a single examination until perhaps the most unlikely of them all yielded. Sir Keith Joseph, a major guru of Margaret Thatcher, became Secretary of State for Education and made what seemed an uncharacteristic concession in 1983. However, a closer scrutiny reveals that there was a sting in the tail of that concession. The Minister agreed to allow the development of a single examination to replace O level and CSE – if the criteria which underpinned it were “*acceptable*”. It would be a government-appointed agency, not the Schools Council, which would define acceptability. For the first time the Boards would have to yield to a central agency in matters which had hitherto formed an essential aspect of their professional judgement. This was a much more overt move towards central control over examinations than they had experienced following the 1944 Act.

The Schools Council was replaced by two bodies, all of whose members would be appointed “*by the Minister*”: the School Curriculum Development Council (SCDC) and the Secondary Examinations Council (SEC). The latter was to vet the acceptability of each syllabus for the new examination submitted by what were to be known as ‘examining groups’: four regional consortia [See **Figure 3.4**] of the former GCE O-level and CSE boards who would administer the General Certificate of

Secondary Education (GCSE) as a single 16+ examination. What had been a total of 23 (9 GCE and 14 CSE) boards took various approaches to the restructuring process. By this time the Bristol board had merged with AEB, the Durham board with JMB and the Joint Oxford and Cambridge board remained aloof, so the resulting constellation produced four English GCSE Groups associated with the five remaining GCE boards in England:

- London and East Anglia Group (LEAG) with the University of London Board;
- Southern Examining Group (SEG) with the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations and the Associated Examining board;
- Midland Examining Group (MEG) with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate;
- Northern Examining Authority (NEA) with the Joint Matriculation Board.

While they still controlled their A-level provision, the examining boards which had grown out of the Victorian culture of a government which remained at a remove from qualifications were now subject to strong central control. Qualifications had become a matter of interest to the evolving “*managerial state*”. This major shift was clear to at least one assessment expert, who observed that GCSE brought in:

...a national syllabus (one would hesitate to call it a curriculum) enforced via national criteria.... There could hardly be a clearer, or more succinct illustration of the development of central intervention over the process of schooling. By designing the product, or outcome, the DES intends to shape the process.

(Gipps 1986: 16)

In similar vein, Desmond Nuttall, perhaps the leading assessment expert at the time, identified what he saw as flaws in the new examination:

(i)...the fact that those with the greatest vested interest – the boards themselves – have been given the task of doing all the drafting makes it unlikely that the new system will adequately meet today's curricular needs....

(ii) The DES have taken upon themselves a much more overt role in steering examination reforms and giving themselves rights (unprecedented since 1945) over the approval of the detailed content of examination syllabuses and schemes of examination.

(Nuttall 1984: 174)

While the Boards did indeed have a vested interest in the new examination – examinations at 16+ comprised the major element of their business – from their standpoint it was Nuttall's second point that was more cogent. The 'Groups' formed by the Boards may have been given the task of doing all the drafting, but the drafts were very closely scrutinised and regularly rejected by officials from the Secondary Examinations Council. Previously such judgements over syllabus or examination detail had been the preserve of the Boards; now the power of veto rested with a new agency. The balance of power had altered. This was certainly the perception of a leader of one examining board at the time:

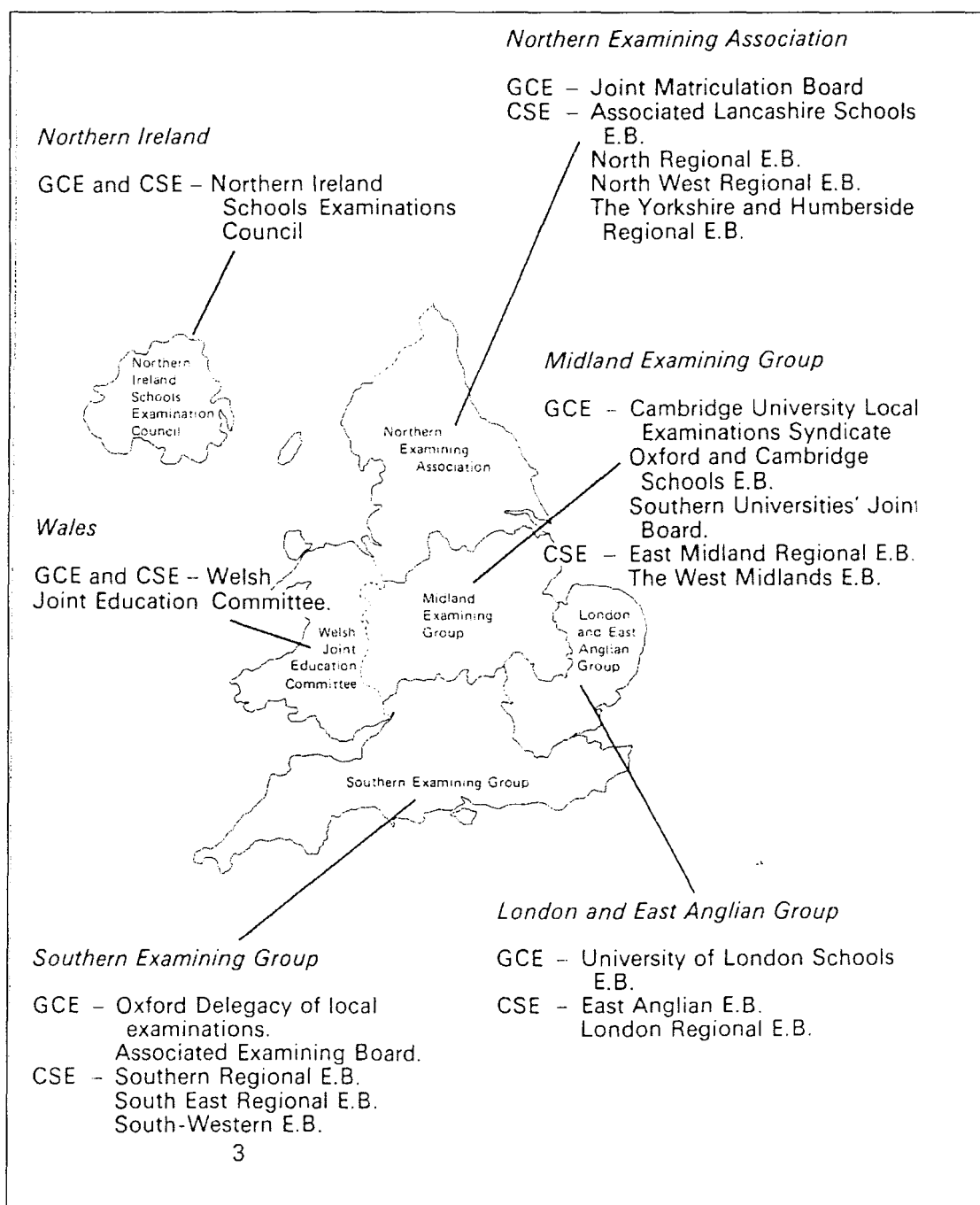
What really in my judgement changed the whole thing was GCSE. That gave government an opportunity to play more than a role of the light touch over the system as a whole...[with] national criteria...acceptable to the government being a pre-requisite of the system. And that brought government much more up front into the examination system than it had ever been before. And everything that's happened since has built on that. It's eroded more and more the independence of the boards.

(AQA1 2000)

This was control of a quite different order. The Boards' established expertise was subject to the judgement of others for the first time in their history. More worrying than the inroads into their independence were questions as to the competence in the complexities of assessment of those taking on the responsibility for accepting or rejecting the new syllabuses. However, the process of increasing central control had only just begun. As the next decade proceeded, governments of both political colours saw increasing their control over public services as a necessary corollary of their responsibility for what became known as the 'delivery' of those services. Although, strictly speaking, the independent examining boards were not public services, this distinction did not restrict government interest in their activities. The 1990s saw them

more and more constrained by the requirements of the central control that grew ever more clearly defined as governments proclaimed a commitment to liberalisation. This process will be the focus of the next chapter. However first it is time to consider what had been happening in the parallel world of vocational qualifications.

Figure 3-4 Regional GCSE Groups



Coda: The English problem with vocational education

Because in the next chapter I will suggest that one pressure on the examining boards resulted from the attempt to unite the divided worlds of academic and vocational qualifications, I shall here trace briefly the quite separate development of vocational qualifications and their providers in England. As was established at the outset of this chapter, English practical education and training have remained quite distinct from school-based education. I have mapped the developments in the accreditation of vocational attainment in England [See **Figure 3.5**]; this section expands on selected aspects of that matrix.

Since its creation in 1878, the principal English body offering accreditation for practical training has been the City and Guilds of London Institute for the Advancement of Technical Education (City & Guilds). The use of the term ‘guilds’ in its title was no accident. Gladstone advocated the term because he saw “*the traditional structure of the guilds as a means of making some progress*” toward his aim of improving the nation’s technical and vocational training. (Bush 1993: 8) While City & Guilds has predominated in this field, the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), created in 1754, established an examining section which began by accrediting those trained in the Mechanics Institutes which began in the 1820s. The RSA continued to be a significant provider of commercial qualifications in particular until it sold its examining section to the Cambridge board in 1995. A third body, created in the 1880s, that has continued to accredit business-related skills is the London Chamber of Commerce, which as LCCI merged in 2002 with Goal plc to form Education Development International.

By 1911 a range of vocational qualifications validated by 40 different bodies had developed. Although it was established to consider the many examinations that had developed, the Dyke-Acland Report of that year made no mention of these vocational awards; its focus was purely on the academic side. Despite this multiplicity of providers and their lesser status in relation to academic qualifications, by 1992 around 2 million vocational awards were being made annually. (Mathieson 1992: 195)

In the 1960s, an attempt was made to sort out this multiplicity of qualifications by establishing Industrial Training Boards to oversee apprenticeship schemes in the major trades. This system involved structured apprenticeships which included some general education through day release to local further education colleges. These training boards proved reasonably effective until in the late 1980s the Thatcher Government abolished all but that of the construction industry, which was deemed to have particular needs. Firms did not immediately experience a shortage of skilled workers because they were able to recruit trained staff from among those made redundant through the same Government's policy of winding down manufacturing industries. It was only as those workers neared retirement that the dearth of skilled artisans became apparent. (Cole 2002) Growing concern over the nation's skills levels then began to replicate that occasioned by the Great Exhibition of 1850.

Following the loss of their day-release courses, further education colleges turned increasingly to what were to become the most successful English vocational courses. They resulted from a 1970s development when, under the aegis of City & Guilds, the

	Development	Rationale	Primary Effects	Secondary Effects
1853	Department of Science and Art created within Board of Trade	To address perceived weakness of English workforce	Established practical training as separate from schools	Signalled academic-vocational divide
1856	RSA provides accreditation for regional Mechanics' Institutes	To accredit practical skills	Skills attainments recognised	Vocational qualifications unrelated to schools
1878	City & Guilds of London Institute established	To improve technical and vocational training and attainment	Independent bodies control vocational education	Voluntarism firmly built into vocational education
ca 1903	London Chamber of Commerce	To accredit commercial skills	Business skills separated from craft skills	Hierarchy of skills developing as providers burgeon
1964	Industrial Training Boards established	To update and improve apprenticeship	National system with day release for general education in colleges	Employers' financial contribution established
1969	Haslegrove Report established BEC and TEC	To regulate college-based vocational courses	New provider challenges 3 established awarding bodies	Alternative provision to apprenticeship system
1976	CGLI established Foundation Courses for FE colleges, schools	To address needs of ROSLA pupils	Opportunity for 'new' 6 th formers in schools, colleges	Start of pre-vocational education and core skills
1980s	Industrial Training Boards phased out by Thatcher government	To replace a national system with market forces	Apprenticeships virtually end	Growing need for effective vocational education
1983	BTEC created by merger of BEC & TEC	Consolidation of growing agencies	Effective route mainly via FE colleges	Competition for 6 th forms and exam boards
1985	CPVE accredited by C&G and BTEC	Need for alternative to academic route in post-16 education	Flexible course with experiential learning and teacher assessment	Concerns about disparities in standards
1986	NCVQ established	To regulate the many vocational qualifications	NVQs created as competence-based, criterion referenced	Sustained bias that applied learning differs from general
1991	Incorporation of FE & 6 th -form colleges	To raise standards through competition	Competition for students taking new GNVQs	3-track system confirmed
1996	QCA absorbs NCVQ	To bridge the ac/voc divide at regulatory level	Central statutory regulation over all qualifications	NVQs still outside framework; still 'different'

Figure 3-5 Vocational Qualification Developments in England

Department of Education and Science established the Technical Education Council (TEC) and the Business Education Council (BEC) to oversee the related courses offered by further education colleges. The two councils merged in 1983 – taking with them a large slice of their mentor’s clientele and staff (CGLI 1993: 42) – to form an awarding body known as BTEC, whose subsequent history will form part of the next chapter. This organisation created a structure of practical courses with a general education component and a clear progression pathway: from First Certificate to Diploma to link with the established Higher National Diploma.

These courses became a major success within further education colleges, and provided a sorely-needed alternative route through practical education. However the further education sector has never wielded sufficient political influence to mount a defence of its successes, and this positive development was to be overtaken by untested experiments growing out of another national employment crisis and the lacuna in the post-16 curriculum referred to above.

When during the 1970s youth unemployment had increased staying-on rates and consequent pressure for change in the sixth-form curriculum, the Department of Education and Science established the Further Education Unit (FEU) to consider the problem. The resulting document introduced new thinking about the nature of learning. *A Basis for Choice* (1979) identified what the FEU termed ‘experiential learning’ as different from the abstractions of the academic approach but an equally valid route for young people to follow. Their approach won out over the Schools Council’s proposed CEE and was endorsed by the English and Welsh Education Ministers, Mark Carlisle and Nicholas Edwards in their 1980 consultation paper on *Examinations 16-18*.

This opened the way for such post-16 initiatives as the City & Guilds '365' pre-vocational courses, the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) and the pre-16 curriculum initiatives developed through the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), a project of the government's Manpower Services Commission, not the Department of Education and Science.

The rationale for these courses was that young people who were not yet ready for the specific vocational training of BTEC courses could profit from continuing their general education within an applied rather than a theoretical framework. This approach was based on the FEU concept of learning. Richard Pring's analysis summed up the essence of what he termed "*the pre-vocational tradition*" as recognising the importance of relevance for the learner as distinct from the traditional view of education as concerned solely with the perfection of the intellect. (Pring 1997: 124) Assignment-led and resource-based rather than teacher-centred, the assessment scheme profiled a range of achievements rather than depending on a single examination grade. However, it was to be the overly flexible nature of the assessment of these courses that proved to be their Achilles' heel. Lacking external validation of the final certificates, the whole pre-vocational movement suffered from a fatal weakness in a society afflicted with the 'diploma disease'. In 1991 a new 'general vocational' course structure was devised that proved somewhat more successful. The examining boards were eventually called in to lend it their assessment *gravitas*.

The enduring English attitude to work-based education

Since the time when the Victorian middle classes chose a classically-based education for their children despite their prospects of a life in trade, Huddleston and Unwin's research indicates that similar attitudes survive:

...We find that qualifications for both education and work are judged within an education paradigm and thus arguments about parity of esteem and the academic/vocational divide are based on the premise that vocational qualifications must prove themselves against an academic yardstick rather than being properly valued in their own right.

(Huddleston and Unwin 1997: 146)

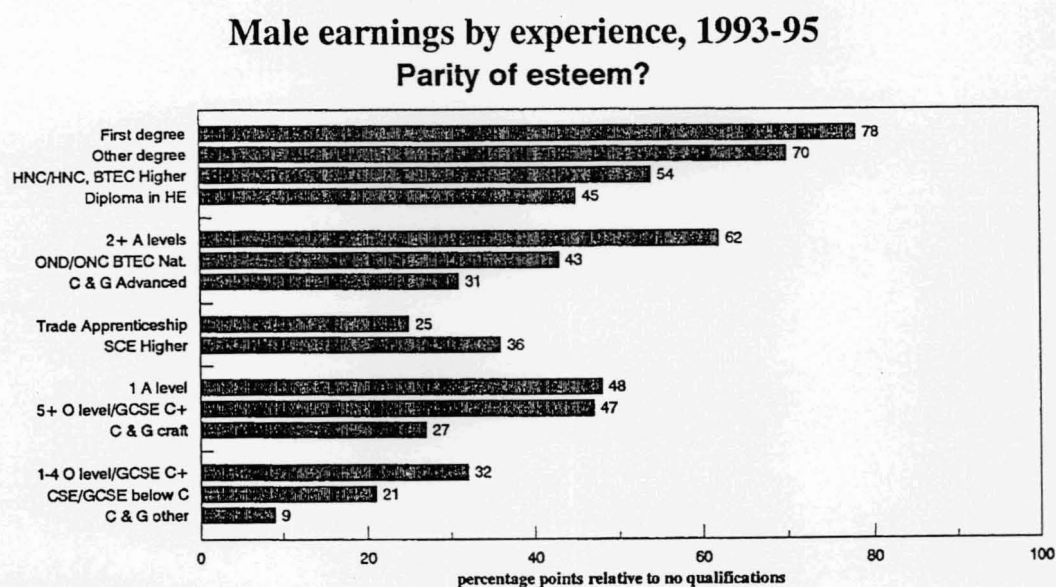
They also question the increasing involvement of employers in the planning of work-based training via the Technical Education Councils (TECs), their successors the Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs) and presumably the Skills Sector Councils (SSCs) referred to in the White Paper of February 2005. Despite paying lip-service to improving vocational training, employers' practice confirms that they "*...reveal in their recruitment and human resource management behaviour that they value academic qualifications as highly, and in some cases more highly than vocational ones*" (Huddleston 1997: 146).

A similar continuing bias toward academic attainment is identified in Peter Robinson's evidence from the labour market. His research [See **Figure 3.6**] indicates that:

Overall...the evidence is quite clear. There is no parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications in the labour market, which is almost certainly why we do not observe parity of esteem in the education system. Young people choose the route that brings a clear advantage.

(Robinson 1997: 197)

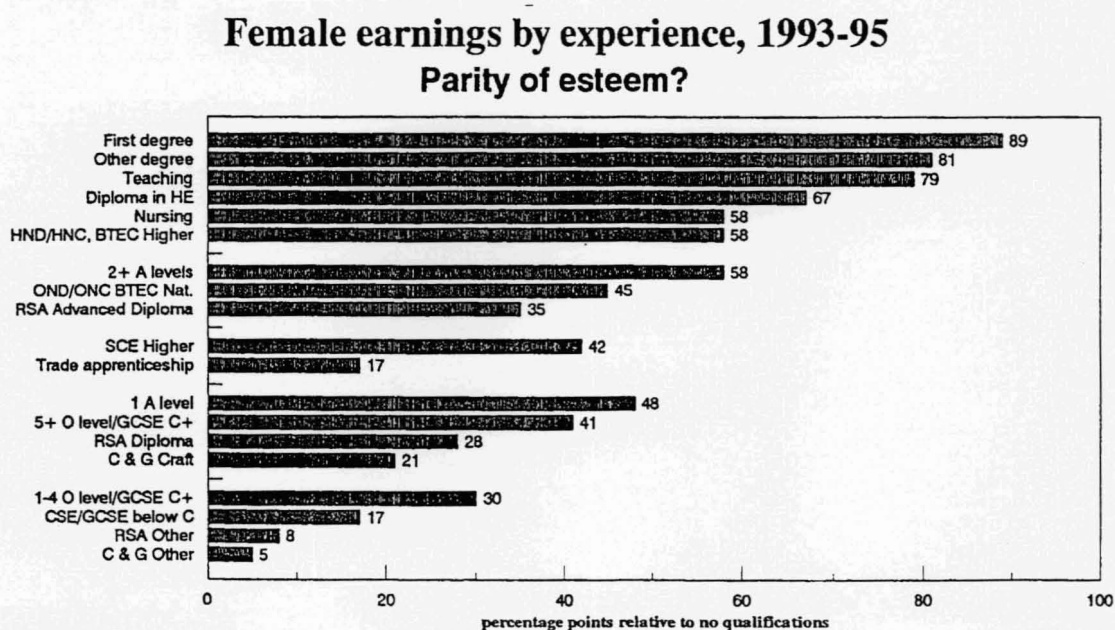
Figure 3-6 Qualifications: Earnings Data



Source: Labour Force Survey

Note: Evaluated at 20 years experience

A & O level split 4 Qs 1994-95 only.



Source: Labour Force Survey

Note: Evaluated at 20 years experience

A & O level split for 4 Qs 1994-95 only

(Robinson 1997: 14)

Making the same point, Alison Wolf cites an observation made in 1952 by the chancellor of the University of Chicago that: *“In a fluid, industrial, scientific democracy, the more specific an education is, the less likely it is to achieve the only purpose that it has – to prepare the student for a particular kind of economic activity”* (Wolf 2002b: 85). With this evidence that academic education is valued both for its status and for its flexibility, the outlook for work-based education in England is grim.

A similar conclusion was reached in 2002 by the authors analysing the changes to post-16 education that the Learning and Skills Council had brought about from 2000. They suggest that *“the overall prognosis for the latest attempt to produce a high quality work-based route is not good.”* They harbour doubts:

...that institutional restructuring, of itself, will produce fundamental change; that the failure of earlier re-brandings of work-based training was...an accident, and that the latest formulation...will somehow be different;[and consider] that there remains a fundamental ambiguity about the future, role, shape and relative importance of the work-based route vis-à-vis full-time educational provision. (Evans, Hodkinson 2002: 207)

Their concerns could well apply to the White Paper on 14-19 education – *14-19 Education and Skills* – published in February of 2005. Despite widespread support for the restructuring recommended in the previous October’s Tomlinson Report, whereby A Levels and GCSEs would be replaced by an inclusive over-arching diploma to accredit all attainment, the new Secretary of State for Education, Ruth Kelly, announced that:

GCSEs and A levels are internationally respected. They will be kept as a cornerstone of 14-19 learning. They will continue to be assessed through rigorous external examinations....
In achieving these objectives [recognition of and progression routes through vocational qualifications], we believe that the Working Group on 14-19 Reform’s proposals for specialised Diplomas in vocational areas are right. (DfES 2005: 45, 47)

A nation's attitudes do not change easily. Yet despite this truism, this chapter has shown that the quest to reform the qualifications system is a continuing one. The 1990s saw the process continue, with the impetus coming from the centre, and having a major impact on the examining boards.

The next chapter focuses on the themes of increasing central control and continuing attempts to improve vocational education combining with other pressures common to all organisations during the 1990s to place the examining boards under severe pressure while they were implementing the major changes which continued the process of undermining their professional independence. Before moving to this next phase, it is important to reflect on what might be termed, depending on one's choice of metaphor, the forest of which these trees form a part, the nature of the tectonic plate movements that lie beneath the story so far or the meta-narrative of which this narrative forms an element.

Looking beneath the narrative: what was really happening?

Returning to my research questions at this point, although they are straightforward and lack any pretensions to profundity, they have served to unearth a body of data that enables the deeper analysis that is the real objective of doctoral research.

1 How did the examining boards evolve from their origins accrediting university matriculation into independent providers of the national qualifications system?

2 How did the successive changes to the examinations structure affect their role?

3 What evidence is there of a shift in control from the Boards to the State?

They have served their purpose of guiding my research; as I have attempted to answer them, I have begun to discern certain deeper movements of which the narrative I have constructed is a manifestation. I have answered the first question in this chapter, and identified evidence which begins to answer the second and third. The evolution of the English examining boards has been shown to be less a matter of policy than of pragmatism. The changes to the system after 1944 and 1983 were accompanied by greater central control but did not actually affect their role. Clear evidence of a shift in control to the centre has been identified in 1947, when the Boards were ejected from the Secondary Schools Examination Committee and excluded from designing the GCE examinations, and again after 1983, when their GCSE syllabuses and examinations were subject to government-appointed regulatory approval.

However, I believe that beneath these developments one can detect indicators of a gradual breakdown in public trust parallel to that which in her Reith Lecture of 2002, Onora O'Neill identified as apparently lying behind politicians' "*quest for greater accountability*" which she locates "*over the last fifteen years*" or "*in the last two decades*" (O'Neill 2002). While not entering the argument as to whether the breakdown in trust is apparent or actual, I believe the case of the examining boards fits O'Neill's description of "*the new accountability...distorting the proper aims of professional practice*" (O'Neill 2002) In considering the changes which affected the examining boards following the Second World War, I have detected from the 1970s early fissures in the foundation of public trust on which the eccentric structure of qualifications providers operated.

While the weakness of the post-war economy delayed wider social change until the 1960s saw the demise of deference, in terms of education it was not until the 1970s that the various pressures that were beginning to threaten the social contract began to make themselves felt. In the 1970s the coinciding of an oil crisis which weakened the labour market with the raising of the school leaving age in 1974 meant pressure on schools for a more flexible curriculum just as the reorganisation of local government that same year had politicised previously consensual metropolitan and county councils as never before. Commitment to the democratic Schools Council dwindled just when its creative response was badly needed. In this vacuum of innovation, the Department of Education and Science stepped up its ambition to take up the slack left by the weakening of the tripartite partnership of Local Education Authorities, teacher unions and Department officials. This ambition lay behind the ‘Yellow Paper’ which informed James Callaghan’s 1976 ‘Ruskin Speech’ – the public rupture of trust in education. As the decade ended with the breakdown in trust between unions and the Labour Government in the 1978/9 ‘Winter of Discontent’, the nation opted for a change of government that ushered in the Thatcherite era where trust was replaced by accountability.

When in 1983 Sir Keith Joseph as Secretary of State for Education yielded to the pressure for a single examination at 16+ but replaced the Schools Council by a centrally appointed regulator, he was following the path outlined by Onora O’Neill, where “*the new accountability takes the form of detailed control*” (O’Neill 2002). The next chapter will demonstrate how this quest for accountability grew ever more intense, with severe consequences for the examining boards.

Chapter 4 The Examining Boards in the 1990s: Under pressure and losing control

By the beginning of the 1990s, the English examining boards had experienced two significant shifts in the balance of control over examinations: firstly with Ministry nominees replacing them on the Secondary Schools Examinations Council after 1944 and then with the creation of the Secondary Examinations Council in 1983. The 1990s were to see control over examinations continue to move inexorably towards the centre with a concomitant imposition of changes both to their own organisational structure and to the qualifications they provide. It is during this decade that one can trace the effects on the examining boards of the “*permanent revolution*” that Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin have identified in their book on the “*continuing reconstruction of the welfare state in the United Kingdom*” (Clarke, Gewirtz 2000: 1). Their analysis finds the process of modernisation and reform begun by the Conservative Government in the 1980s to have been carried on with equal enthusiasm by the New Labour Government after 1997. Although forming an agency of the “*educational state*” rather than of the welfare state which is the focus of Clarke, Gewirtz and McLaughlin, the examining boards in particular and the education world in general experienced the effects of the general zeal for centrally generated change.

This chapter will analyse how the various changes the Boards experienced during the 1990s brought to them a point where their long-established qualifications were being questioned. They were losing their status as one of the accepted “*conglomeration of...agencies*” within “*the educational state*”(Ball 1990:20). I will suggest as the explanation for this change that by the end of the decade the imperatives of the “*new managerialism*” had virtually stripped them of their independence. Greatly increased

regulatory powers had effectively encroached upon their ability to exercise their professional judgement. It had been the established quality of their assessment expertise that had underwritten the reliability of the qualifications they offered. With their ability to exercise that professional skill severely inhibited by central regulation, it will be contended, the examining boards are in danger of becoming little more than outsourcing agencies providing qualifications entirely designed and controlled by a central, government-appointed body.

As evidence for this position, the chapter will interweave data from the interviews I have conducted with my analysis of other sources in order to triangulate the evidence produced to support my contention that the Boards were experiencing a significant loss of independence. It will open with a summary of the continuing critiques of post-16 qualifications – both vocational and A level – which led to the two major qualification reforms of the 1990s: firstly the creation of General Vocational Qualifications and then *Curriculum 2000* which changed the structure of the A levels which had lasted for half a century.

Then, after a brief consideration of the series of policy papers which reshaped the world of the examining boards and will be referred to throughout this section, the analysis will focus on some of the general themes that formed the context for all English organisations during the 1990s and how their influence impacted specifically on the Boards, with each factor contributing to the shift to central control. I will argue that the dynamic interaction of these factors led to a step change in the relationship between the Boards and their regulator and changed the balance of power irrevocably.

Clearly, the examining boards were not alone in experiencing many of the decade's stresses: they formed the context within which all English organisations had to

operate. However, the interaction of these broader factors with particular issues the Boards faced internally meant they were experiencing continuing strains. These strains might have gradually eased had it not been for the major upheaval to their core product resulting from the restructuring of A levels through *Curriculum 2000*.

What will be characterised as ‘external’ issues derive from the fundamental change to the world of education resulting from the introduction of marketisation and competition with the related expectation of accountability. This was an essential aspect of what is often termed the neo-liberal agenda. Geoff Whitty summarised this political stance:

For the neo-liberal politicians who dominated educational policy-making in Britain and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s, social affairs are best organised according to the ‘general principle of consumer sovereignty’....
(Whitty 2002: 79)

Taking the longer historical view of developments since 1944, Gary McCulloch does include the Boards in his analysis, and confirms the changing relationship between the Boards and the State:

Exam boards and the State have maintained the uneasy tension over the management of public exams that emerged from the 1940 settlement, although with increasing signs of instability in this arrangement. In the contest for control and authority over secondary school exams in the early 1990s, the State was again in the process of asserting itself. Whereas in the 1940s it had done so on behalf of a notion of ‘teacher responsibility’, however, in the 1990s it was on behalf of the very different notion of ‘public accountability’.
(McCulloch 1994: 144)

Exerting increasing central control in the interests of public accountability formed one element of the paradox that saw the State simultaneously advocating the liberating influence of the market while steadily inhibiting public sector independence. Although technically forming part of the “*educational state*”, the Boards had always formed a competitive market, if one which avoided strident rivalry. Yet during the 1990s, apparently flying in the face of market theory, increasing central control

significantly inhibited their ability to compete. This control derived from the reputed benefits which ‘clients’ (whether the state or the ‘consumers’ of examinations) would earn from unification, regulation and increased accountability.

The first of these orthodoxies was the notion that large units delivering economies of scale were more efficient market mechanisms than several small organisations. This popularly accepted objective was at least one of the motives for moves to the uniting firstly of government agencies and then of the examining bodies. Some hoped initially that these mergers, which they saw as “*part of a wider movement towards national organisational unification*”...signalled a “*possibility that they could have a significant effect on the further reform of qualifications*” (Spours 1998: 2). Although qualification reform did follow with the introduction of *Curriculum 2000*, it was more *post hoc* than *propter hoc*. The virtues of unification seemed related more to bringing commercial practice into the public sector than to qualification reform. This was the revised view of Hodgson and Spours in a later publication, who had come to the view that: “*Part of the national regulatory agenda accompanying marketisation has been the trend towards the ‘unification’ of national regulatory agencies*” (Hodgson 2003: 8).

A concomitant of the move towards unification was an increase in regulatory control: another contradictory function of the market. Because government agencies were held accountable for the ‘products’ of the system, they felt they ought to ensure that those products were ‘quality controlled’. Again, one analysis suggested that this increase was a necessary response to “*concerns about awarding body entrepreneurship and the possibility that this could compromise ‘standards’*” (Spours 1998:12). However, seen over a longer timescale, it seems less an effect of marketisation than the continuation

of a long but inexorable process of the ever-tightening central control that began in 1944.

A final effect of viewing the examining boards through a marketised lens was the requirement that they be accountable to their clients; for the examining boards, accountability took the form of a vigorous debate about examination standards. Yet the problem was that the range of the Boards' 'clients' – students, parents, teachers, higher education, employers and, of course, the Government – did not share the same perception of those standards. This issue, regularly highlighted in the media, I believe to be at least partly the result of a complex misunderstanding that has developed in England about the basis on which grades are awarded. The assessment theories that lie behind this debate will be analysed to illustrate the pressure that the issue brought to bear on the examining boards. The standards debate, it will be argued, weakened their reputation and strengthened the case for increased control over them.

The underlying theme of the chapter is that it was the effect of the interaction of these external factors with the internal issues dealt with in the following section that threatened the stability of these longstanding organisations. The various resulting questions raised over their reputation for producing valid and reliable qualifications provided the justification for policy decisions that led, in my view, to the effective loss of their independence.

Before considering the changes the Boards underwent during the 1990s, it is necessary to clarify the critiques that convinced policy makers that such changes were necessary.

Continuing Attempts to Revalue the ‘Gold Standard’

The previous chapter dealt with the abortive attempts of the Schools Council to make changes to the structure of A levels and one initiative by the Boards to broaden their scope. However, as time passed, their unsuitability as the only qualification available for those remaining in education after 16 became increasingly evident. The growth of comprehensive schools, the improved attainment rates following the introduction of GCSE and shrinking employment opportunities meant an ever-widening range of young people were staying on after 16. “*Between 1987 and 1994, full-time participation at 16 rose from under 50 per cent [of the age group] to about 70 per cent*” (Hodgson 1997: 6).

There lingered in some quarters the notion of the sixth form as the opportunity for an able minority to pursue specialist disciplines through their study of A levels, which Michael Fallon, a Junior Education Minister in 1991, termed ‘flagships’ and ‘gold standards’. (Quoted in Mathieson 1992: 195) This was less and less a true reflection of comprehensive sixth forms where, alongside the able majority there were those who failed A-level examinations at the age of 18 with nothing to show for two years’ work. Before the major reform of 1999 with the introduction of *Curriculum 2000*, there were continuing attempts to broaden the education of those studying at advanced level.

What critics have long identified as a major weakness of A levels is their narrow specialisation. (Green 1997: 88) There is no national 6th-form curriculum, and students choose subjects without any requirement to continue their general education – a circumstance that makes English post-16 education unique. This has led to complaints from both higher education institutions and employers that many lack the

numeracy, literacy or linguistic skills expected in a well-rounded education. Chapter Three touched on the examining boards' attempt to address this problem by devising a General Studies A level. However, it was to be the regulatory body which replaced the Schools Council in 1983 which initiated a variation on A levels.

A Committee-Designed Half-A-Level: the AS

The Secondary Examinations Council introduced the idea of 'half A levels' which they named Advanced Supplementary (AS). Yet, once again, in precisely the same manner as the Secondary Schools Examinations Council had expected the examining boards to create A levels with a minimal design brief in the 1940s, the SEC too did not consult the Boards about the new qualification's design, but expected them to produce it. In the following excerpt from the SEC's Annual Report of 1985-1986, the Council conceded that it had not provided adequate criteria for the Boards to follow:

The intention to introduce AS-levels for first examination in 1989 was formally announced by the Secretary of State in March 1985. In response to this, Examining Boards are currently developing syllabuses which are expected to come before the SEC for approval in the autumn and winter of 1986.

Council has already noted that the absence of clearly defined criteria for AS-levels may pose difficulties and that some delicate but essential negotiations may become necessary during the approvals period.

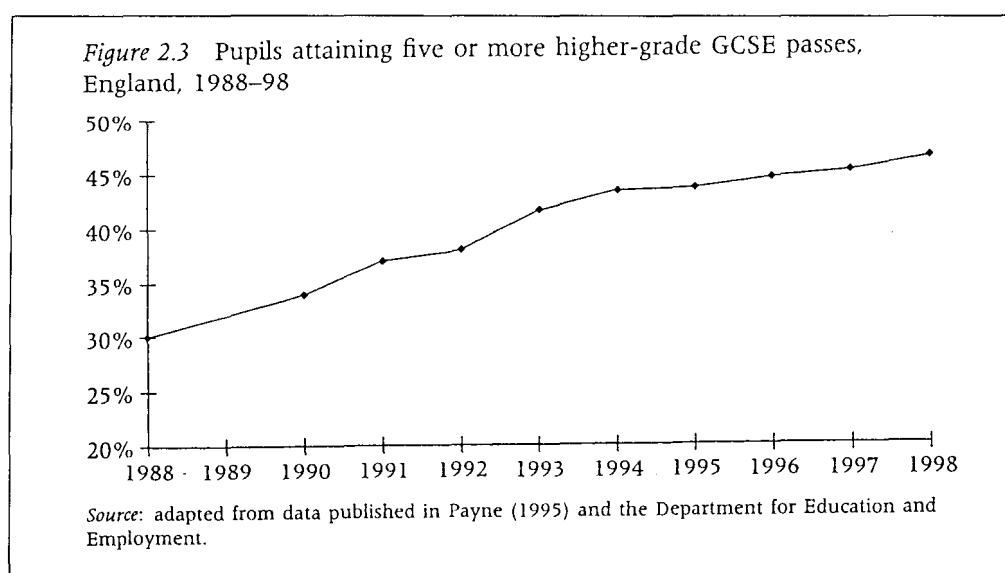
(SEC 1986: 14)

The slightly coy tone of this citation indicates that this body considered the Boards to require delicate handling, but felt no obligation to involve them in creating criteria. It is more reminiscent of the tone in which Virginia Woolf discussed dealing with her difficult cook than that of a regulator dealing responsibly with experienced agencies.

The inherent weaknesses of the AS qualification soon became apparent. The Secondary Heads Association pointed out that "...the current AS syllabuses [were]

designed only for the present A-level cohort" (Mathieson 1992:193), so were not going to fulfil the need to include the widening ability range staying on in sixth forms and further education following the improving attainment rates achieved with GCSE. [See **Figure 4-1**] As for their broadening function, this was limited because most schools were able to fund only a very limited number of subjects at AS level.

Figure 4-1 Rising GCSE Attainment Rates



(Gillborn 2000: 34)

AS students were routinely co-taught with those taking the full A level but attended only half the lessons. This practice cast them as lesser versions of the real thing. Before the limitations of AS levels had become fully apparent, the government in March 1987 asked Professor Higginson to investigate structural means of widening students' experience.

Professor Higginson Proposes More, Leaner and Tougher A levels

In her overview of attempts to reform A levels, Margaret Mathieson identified a shift in the 1980s behind the drive for reform. She felt that the initiative was becoming driven less by educationists' advocating breadth than by policymakers' concern about England's international competitiveness. The brief of the Higginson committee was to:

...Recommend the principles which should govern GCE A-level syllabuses and their assessment (with a view to broadening courses of study and thereby increasing the numbers moving on to higher education).
(Mathieson 1992: 191)

The Higginson Report was published in the summer of 1988 and made a series of recommendations which commanded widespread support:

- 1 Five rather than three subjects should be the norm.*
 - 2 'Leaner and tougher' syllabuses should be less padded with 'inessential and inconsequential information.*
 - 3 Students should continue to be drawn from high ability groups.*
 - 4 More concentration is needed on high level skills such as the ability to think and act independently and less on memorised facts.*
 - 5 All subjects should have a compulsory common core to ensure greater compatibility between boards.*
 - 6 There should be far fewer syllabuses. (At present they number in excess of 400.)*
 - 7 Criteria-based assessment and reporting should be introduced.*
 - 8 Schools and colleges should be accredited to control in-course assessment for up to 20% of the final mark.*
- (Quoted in Mathieson 1992: 192)

Mathieson reported the "great disappointment" of a wide cross section of supporters of the Higginson proposals – the Committee of University Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), the Standing Committee on University Entrance (SCUE), the teaching unions and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) – when the Government rejected them (Mathieson 1992: 192). The stated grounds for this rejection were the number of concurrent changes elsewhere in the system – widely judged to be a rather lame excuse in view of the fact that they were all changes which

the Government had instigated. However, the fact that the Headmasters Conference was not among the supporters of Higginson was believed to weigh heavily in government thinking – an instance of the continuing influence of the private sector on the state system.

The shortcomings of their new qualification had become apparent to the Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council (1988 successor to the SEC). In 1991 one of its committees proposed another structural change which would mean that a student might take five or six AS exams in her or his first year in the 6th form and continue with two or three of the subjects as A-levels in the second year. This virtual reworking of the Schools Council's 1969 Q & F proposals was to resurface in 1999 as *Curriculum 2000*: there is little that is new in English qualification development. But at the beginning of the decade, just as they had been opposed to Higginson's recommendations, the Head Masters' Conference – the voice of the private sector – saw the SEAC proposal as yet again a threat to A levels. That voice was always a powerful one with the Conservative Government, and "*HMC was influential enough for the proposal to be immediately rejected*" (Hodgson 1997: 47). The private sector retained the influence necessary to sway qualification debates.

A First Attempt at Embedding Core Skills

A final effort to make limited structural changes while retaining the A level in its 1953 format was the plan to embed 'key skills' as an element to be assessed. This was an attempt to address what had become known as the 'skills deficit'. Regular complaints from industry about the education system's production of young people with inadequate levels of literacy and numeracy led John McGregor, Secretary of State for Education in 1989 to promote what became known as 'core skills'. He

requested that the Secondary Examinations and Assessment Committee (SEAC) work with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) using the Further Education Unit's notions of a core skills curriculum (Green 1997: 91) to identify and assess the attainment of these skills within A-level study.

Green's account of the core skills concept suggests two reasons for the rejection of the proposals at A level:

First, the examining boards felt that they would rather use the limited amount of coursework assessment available for assessing subject knowledge rather than core skills, and, second, the government feared the inclusion of core skills would in some way 'distort' A-levels.
(Green 1997: 91)

The core skills episode was seen by other critics as “*another half-hearted attempt to make A-levels more 'relevant'*” (Young 1997:48). Core skills were to return as a major issue after the publication of the 1996 Dearing Report, in that context as one means of bridging the academic/vocational divide.

The Boards' Positive Alterations to the A-Level Pattern

As well as such attempts at making structural changes to A levels, Young and Leney identify what they call “*incremental changes*”, by which they mean:

...changes in content of subject syllabuses, the introduction of new subjects, the development of new subject cores and new forms of assessment, including the shift from linear to modular syllabuses. (Young 1997: 48)

It is interesting to note that they attribute these changes, which they view favourably, as representing:

...efforts on the part of teachers to make A-levels more relevant and accessible to the wider range of students who were now staying on in sixth forms.
(Young 1997: 48)

No mention is made of the examining boards, which had in fact activated these changes. Except for the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), teachers in

England have never had the power to alter the syllabus or assessments of external examinations. Instead they have been able, through their representation on examining boards and subject committees, to propose new approaches.

An ambitious ‘incremental innovation’ that won considerable support from 6th forms in one region was the Associated Examining Board’s ‘Wessex’ project, which involved linking several subjects into modules around a core syllabus. Bob Rainbow has chronicled the brief history of this project in his chapter in the 1993 collection on *The Reform of Post-16 Education and Training in England and Wales*. (Richardson, Woolhouse 1993)

His case history of the Wessex Project explains how this collaboration involving five adjacent Local Education Authorities working with the Associated Examining Board began in 1987 from a scheme devised by teachers and advisers. The Secondary Examinations Advisory Council (SEAC) gave it ‘limited pilot status’ until July 1993. (Rainbow 1993: 87) The structure involved both core skills and a specific vocational focus to ensure the breadth which had always been missing from single A-levels.

The assessment pattern borrowed from the newly-created GCSE the concept of coursework modules assessed by teachers, with the board’s external assessment comprising 60% of the final award. Rainbow – writing before the end of the pilot period – feared that “...*the very success of this approach* [teachers providing students with feedback during a module] *many be the Project’s undoing if critics of criterion-referenced examinations prevail*” (Rainbow 1993: 95). He was also concerned that the success of students, which led to the bunching of results in the upper grade levels, would be interpreted as evidence of ‘grade inflation’. He was proved right when in July 1993 SEAC’s assessors did not authorise the Wessex Project to continue.

Rainbow reflected ruefully that “...one of the consequences of the increased centralisation of education in England and Wales is a reduction in its flexibility” (Rainbow 1993: 100).

The ending of the Wessex Project was a matter of regret to staff at the AEB who had been involved in the scheme. They had been learning to adapt to the “*shift in emphasis away from the AEB as an external arbiter to its role as a partner in the process of assessment*” (Rainbow 1993: 99). Ending this positive development seemed a retrograde step. But once more, it made clear that the power of reform lay with neither schools nor Boards, but with the Government’s regulatory body. If marketisation had truly been operating, this ‘product innovation’ should have been a sign of the commercial health of at least one Board. The Wessex affair can perhaps be interpreted as the first indication that, wherever else market theory was operating, the examining boards were experiencing just the opposite.

Of all the attempts to reform A levels, these incremental changes within the established A-level framework were by far the most successful. Yet the Boards were not given any credit for their success, and at the end of the decade a radical change was designed by the regulatory body with the Boards involved only nominally.

Education in the 1990s: The policy generators of change

In the world of English education, the final decade of the 20th century began:

...a period of reform that is unprecedented since the rise of modern schooling in the nineteenth century, both for its trenchant criticisms of established institutions and values, and for its concern to change the entire culture of schooling towards new ends.
(McCulloch 1994: 36)

The examining boards were undoubtedly established institutions and certainly subject both to change and to criticism during the 1990s. Stephen Ball's three causal factors behind these changes would also identify the examining boards as likely targets for criticism:

(i)...ideological shifts and changing patterns of influence within the Conservative Party, institutional ambitions of the DES, and...the impact and commitment of Secretaries of State and their ministers. (ii) Some notion of 'correspondence(s)' between education and the economy.... (iii) the role of discourses (the key concept of Michel Foucault) [wherein the] 'discourse of derision' acted to debunk and displace not only specific words and meanings – progressivism and comprehensivism, for example – but also the speakers of these words, those 'experts', 'specialists' and 'professionals' referred to as the 'educational establishment'. These privileged speakers have been displaced...by abstract mechanisms and technologies of 'truth' and 'rationality' – parental choice, the market, efficiency and management.
(Ball 1990: 17-18)

The preceding chapter has shown how, after a first shift to more central control, a 1980s policy decision had made serious inroads into the Boards' independence. This was Sir Keith Joseph's introduction of the single examination at 16+ in 1986 with the requirement that all syllabuses for the new courses be vetted by the Secondary Examinations Council. For the first time in their history, the Boards were not to be the final arbiters of syllabus and assessment design. A second result of Sir Keith's decision affected the Boards' established balance. In a statement that was to be repeated ten years later by Ron Dearing, the policy paper announcing the new examination "*emphasized that, under the old dual system [O level and CSE], there were 'too many awarding bodies and too many syllabuses'.*" (Quoted in Wolf 2002a: 226) The requirement that there be four GCSE examining groups in England destabilised their previous implicit sharing of the qualifications market and left at least one board in serious financial difficulty. In the view of one informed observer, "*In a sense there were never really four Groups' worth [in England]. And...it really goes way back to 1988 that the Government set up too many GCSE Groups*" (OCR2

2003). Following their creation, these Groups were all to undergo various internal reorganisations which will be considered below.

The 1988 ERA and the 1991 White Paper

After the 1987 election and the third successive victory for Margaret Thatcher's Government, "*the newly elected government was immediately ready to turn the piercing Thatcherite eye on education*" (Barber 1996: 36). The radical reform programme embodied in the 1988 Education Reform Act signalled that the market had entered the world of education. Michael Barber quotes Stephen Ball, "*sharp and critical as ever*", in describing this version of what was not so much a free market as a franchise: "*You run the restaurant, we set the menu*" (Quoted in Barber 1996: 50). Ball's more serious analysis typifies the response of the education world to this legislation:

At the heart of the Act is an attempt to establish the basis of an education market. The key provisions of the Act replace the principle of equal access to education for all with the principle of differentiation in the market place ...[through] choice, competition, diversity, funding and organisation."
(Ball 1990:60)

Clive Chitty, writing at a later date, recalls that the Act:

...attracted more bitter and widespread professional opposition than any piece of legislation passed since the introduction of the National Health Service in the second half of the 1940s.
To encapsulate its basic purpose, the 1988 Act sought to erect (or reinforce) a hierarchical system of schooling subject both to market forces and to greater control from the centre.
(Chitty 2004: 51)

His later analysis adds the significant factor of "*greater control from the centre*" which has emerged as a clear outcome as time has passed. It seems counter-intuitive that a move to an education market, with its implied freedom from control, should in

fact see an inexorable tightening of central power. Chitty posits a three-way control structure: the DES, HMI – “*the organic intellectuals of the DES*” – and the Downing Street Policy Unit. (Chitty 2004: 93) Michael Barber, who was to become an influential figure in that Policy Unit following the 1997 election, acknowledges that the 1988 Act was radical, but suggests that he, like other opponents of its reforms:

...had missed two fundamental points....Firstly, we offered no credible alternative to what was perceived by the public at large ...to be an inadequate existing state of affairs. Secondly, we had completely failed to identify a series of underlying social changes which would sooner or later have forced a radical shift in education policy whether we liked it or not.
(Barber 1996: 37)

His view was that “*the partnership model of decision-making, after which many educationists still foolishly hanker, was demonstrably inadequate by the 1980s*”(Barber 1996: 49). He suggests a list of six problems that made what he terms “*a cultural revolution*” inevitable: growing social diversity, dissatisfaction with the high level of failure, concern about national competitiveness, the need to control public spending, the need for accountability, and the painfully slow rate of decision making. (Barber 1996: 49) The Thatcher Government’s radical combination of market forces with centralisation was the result of an ideological position; but the status quo was not an option.

For the examining boards, the centralising tendency had resulted in the complex process of reorganisation they were required to set in train following the introduction of the GCSE. This first step in upsetting their established sharing of the market had left them as organisations ill prepared for yet more externally generated change during the 1990s. In this sense, then, the changes of the 1990s had to be implemented by organisations still absorbing the effects of policy decisions made in 1983.

The policy document which set the tone for post-16 education in the 1990s was the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century*. The Government's objectives were to improve standards and, using the language of the market, make colleges more responsive to their potential 'client base'. This document had a major impact on the whole of post-16 education as it, in the words of one analysis:

...formalized a triple-track national qualifications framework based on an academic track (A-levels), a broad vocational track (GNVQs) and an occupationally specific track (NVQs) [and moved] towards an education and training market and the end to local planning of post-16 education with the incorporation of FE colleges.

(Hodgson and Spours 1997: 9)

In also endorsing the removal of polytechnics from local authority control and upgrading them all to university status, the White Paper changed the face of higher education. This upgrading of the polytechnics did not, as might have been expected, noticeably reduce the pressure for university places but instead gradually intensified the demand for differentiated examination grades to assist the selection process. This became another of the pressures on the examining boards.

For the examining boards the effect of this White Paper and the legislation which it signalled was more indirect than the earlier introduction of GCSE or the Dearing Report which followed. However, it altered the terrain of post-16 education by formalising the education market, with the consequent competition, mergers, and accountability for products that a market entails. This fundamental philosophical change prepared the ground for subsequent policies which were to affect the Boards directly. Before considering these, it is important to consider what had been happening within one area that had remained outside the focus of government attention until the 1990s turned the spotlight on them: vocational qualifications.

In 1992 the Department of Education and Science launched its newly conceived General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) – which, “*unlike any of the other public examinations in the UK...was designed from scratch entirely by government agencies, in this case NCVQ...*”(Wolf 2002a: 220). While I would suggest that what was virtually a government agency had designed GCSE, there is no question that the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) controlled the design of this new qualification. It was to be offered by the three vocational awarding bodies – BTEC, City & Guilds and RSA – with the NCVQ as their regulator. This new post-16 qualification would be the factor that precipitated the eventual reconfiguring of the examining boards.

The General National Vocational Qualification

The NCVQ had been established in 1986 to address concerns about both the multiplicity and the quality of vocational qualification providers in Britain. The solution was to create a regulatory body modelled on the German system despite the fact that Germany’s “*industrial structure, main industries, political organization, school system and employer-union relations are all so hugely different*” from England’s. (Wolf 2002b: 71) The existing vocational qualifications were to be analysed in terms of levels of ‘competences’ and rebranded as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). Just as the Secondary Examinations Council and its successors were empowered with regulating the examining boards, NCVQ was to bring the vocational awarding bodies and their multitude of qualifications to heel.

Wolf has provided an entertaining account of the brief history of the NVQ in her book *Does Education Matter?* (Wolf 2002b). However, its relevance here is that the NVQ provided the model for the first government-initiated addition to post-16 school-based qualifications since 1944. The General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in turn was to precipitate significant structural changes within the examining boards.

This new qualification, based like NVQs on a competence-based assessment structure, was 'general' rather than occupationally specific and retained a core of general education in the form of core skills. By a parallel process to that which had produced GCSEs, the three vocational awarding bodies – City & Guilds, BTEC and RSA – drew up the detailed specifications with NCVQ vetting their proposals. According to an official from one of those awarding bodies, the task was complicated by the frequent changes NCVQ introduced despite the lack of government funding for the rising development costs:

...it was a nightmare. We had nothing to subsidise it with apart from our reserves. And to have people sitting in conference rooms and focus groups talking about what's the appropriate ideal thing to have in terms of assessment, and up go the costs. And 'we want rigour' and up go the costs.
(City & Guilds 2000)

After its launch in 1993, the GNVQ proved attractive to young people in 6th forms and colleges. However it was not long before criticisms began to focus on the undoubtedly unwieldy assessment system, described as "*the most complicated...in the history of vocational qualifications*" (Spours and Young 1997b: 61). The most trenchant of the critics was Alan Smithers, who chose the unusual but effective medium of television to launch his attack. (Smithers 1993)

This dissatisfaction with GNVQs together with the ongoing concern about A levels led the government to commission Ron Dearing to review the whole matter of post-16

qualifications. His 1996 report recommended that the necessary rigour of GNVQ assessment could best be assured by entrusting the process to the examining boards, whose experience in providing rigorous assessment was proven. (Dearing 1996: 138)

A wider benefit of this step would be the perennially desirable one of bridging the academic/vocational divide. It was by this route, then, that a vocational qualification became a factor in the world of the examining boards in the mid-1990s. It was to have a profound effect on their organisational structures. It was also incontrovertible evidence of growing central government involvement in a field previously quite outside its remit. In her overview of 20th century qualifications and assessment, Wolf stresses this point: “...*What the history of GNVQ does demonstrate...is the progressive nationalization of assessment and examination policy, and the direct day by day involvement of ministers in decisions*” (Wolf 2002a: 221).

SCAA, OFSTED and Dearing

In 1993, the examination boards’ regulatory body was reorganised again: the Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) was merged with the National Curriculum Council (NCC) to form The Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). [See **Figure 4.2**]. While this move was widely seen as an educationally desirable marrying of the curriculum and its assessment, for the Boards it meant adjusting to a reconfiguration of this important relationship and the uncertainty that such change engenders.

In that same year, the Government made a change to the system of school inspection that was to have a significant if indirect effect on the Boards. As part of the general

move toward increased accountability, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) was established. Its inspection reports on schools were to be published both locally and nationally, and together with the publication of ‘league tables’ of schools’ examination results to spotlight schools’ relative performance. Because of the vital role of all this data in parental decisions over choice of schools, examination results now were clearly linked with schools’ future survival. This new power of examinations was translated into ever-increasing appeals over unsatisfactory results. For the Boards this meant a major acceleration in the processing of appeals – an area that had never before been more than a minor activity.

In 1996 Sir Ron Dearing, knighted for his achievement in reviewing the National Curriculum and its assessment scheme for 5-16 year olds, was asked to turn his attention to the post-16 age-group in his *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* (the Dearing Report). A critical assessment describes Dearing’s reports in general as “...masterpieces of compromise, placating warring players rather than offering visionary solutions...” and his 16-19 Review as “couched almost entirely in terms of employment needs – universities get an occasional mention, but beyond that, the whole section is conceived in terms of workplace requirements” (Wolf 1998: 222). Despite this focus, his report was to generate significant changes to qualifications, to the regulators and to the examining boards. It designed the route which led to the *Guaranteeing Standards* consultation in 1997, recommending changes to the awarding bodies’ structure, and to *Qualifying for Success* following the Labour victory in 1997 which led to the redesign of A levels through *Curriculum 2000*. All of these will be considered in more detail later in the chapter, but the cumulative effect of these policy documents on the examining boards was profound. They were the means of “an unprecedented centralization of education policy and administration in

England and Wales” with “*ever-increasing regulation and oversight of the whole examining process*” (Wolf 2002a: 216) By 2000 the Boards were organisations whose independence was at the very least severely limited if not illusory.

Now, in order to analyse how various aspects of these policies impacted upon the Boards, the strands that comprise the whole fabric have to be pulled apart and considered individually. I have categorized one group of these aspects as external and stemming from factors beyond the Boards’ control and a second group as internal and affecting the organisational operations. The four external pressures I have identified are:

Marketisation

Unification

Regulation

Standards

The three ‘internal’ pressures are of course related to the external factors:

Staffing problems

Upgrading information systems

Financial pressures

I maintain that the interaction of these issues had a destabilising effect on the performance of the Boards which, because of their gradual loss of professional independence, they were powerless to counteract.

External Issues Affecting the Examining Boards

I must again make it clear that I am in no way claiming that the examining boards were alone in facing these pressures. As organisations functioning within the culture of the 1990s they were of course subject to the prevailing winds of policy, commerce and social change. However, I believe it is valid to consider the effects of these general trends on a particular group of organisations which had functioned for a century virtually untouched by such environmental influences. The first and yet most intangible of these I wanted to consider was the effect on the whole terrain of secondary education brought about by the introduction of a post-16 ‘market’.

1 The Examinations Market: Old loyalties to examining boards disappear

The market as applied to English examinations is perhaps best described as a version of what Whitty has termed:

...quasi-markets [which involve] a combination of parental choice and school autonomy together with a greater or lesser degree of public accountability and government regulation.
(Whitty 2002: 46)

In the case of the examinations market, one can substitute in Whitty’s description: teacher choice and departmental autonomy, accountability in the form of schools’ examination ‘league tables’ and tighter central regulation of the Boards. The evidence for the argument in this section is based on data gathered from a variety of sources but also on the researcher’s close involvement in the issues. Following Yin’s advice, cited above, concerning bringing “...*your own prior expert knowledge to your case study*”(Yin 1994: 123), I contend that here too personal involvement can offer certain

insights into the widespread perceptions that prevailed at a time when, as in an large-scale decision-making process, perceptions are often the deciding factor.

Certainly my experience supports the view that firstly the introduction of GCSE and later the move toward competition between 11-18 schools and 6th-form or FE colleges substantially altered the way teachers made decisions about post-16 qualifications providers. No longer could established connections be taken for granted. In the absence of objective information in this instantly-created qualifications market, these decisions were being made on the basis of hearsay. Therefore what was being said is relevant in building a full picture of market-related pressures on the boards.

Although the examining boards had effectively operated competitively since their inception, in practice they had tended to serve particular client groups. Having been first created by universities to administer their own selection process, since the advent of national School Certificates, any Board could in theory be chosen by any school. In practice schools tended to stay with the one with which they felt at least a tenuous connection.

With the post-war introduction of GCE examinations and the significant growth in candidate numbers, the informal configuration of core 'clients' solidified into the following pattern:

- the public schools continued to use the Oxford & Cambridge Joint Board which had been set up to serve them;
- other private schools used either the Oxford Delegacy or the Cambridge Syndicate;
- southern grammar schools used the London Board;

- virtually all state schools north of Watford used the Joint Matriculation Board;
- Further Education colleges used the Associated Examining Board.

This pattern was unaffected by the introduction of the CSE because that qualification was administered through regional bodies. Schools were not free to select any CSE provider, but were restricted to that of their geographical area because of the high degree of teacher involvement in the qualification. There was, therefore, little significant movement from one board to another until the inception of GCSE in 1986 occasioned considerable upheaval. Then “*the inertia which had tended to keep institutions with the same exam board over the years was suddenly replaced by the need for a clear-eyed look at what each board offered*” (Sturgis 2000: 33). The new single examination at 16+ was an unknown quantity and required each department in each school in the country to consider all the new syllabuses and decide which would be most appropriate for their students.

When this form of ‘product differentiation’ was applied to choice of examining board, the historical balance of their respective market shares altered as the ties of some old loyalties weakened. Although strong northern solidarity meant that the traditional links of schools in the north generally transferred to the Northern Examining Authority (NEA), in the rest of the country few certainties remained. The Midland Examining Group (MEG), with access to the deep pockets of Cambridge for the necessary resources, stole a march on the other Groups by rapidly getting its syllabuses into schools and running training courses in the new style of examination. This pro-active approach proved effective in winning a larger share of candidates, as an official with that board recalled:

MEG had always punched above where it was meant to be in terms of its weight and its entry. And I remember quite a few conversations with my friends in the

north, who were really sort of put out by the amount we had taken from them. Nonetheless, we actually did take more market from the south, and it was London who was weakened by MEG's strength, not the NEAB.
(OCR2 2003)

Although at the time such sensitive commercial information was kept very quiet, persistent rumour suggested that both the AEB, responsible with the Oxford Board for the Southern Examining Group (SEG), and the London Board's London and East Anglia Group (LEAG) had suffered serious losses of candidates and hence of income.

Long after the event, a former Secretary General of AEB admitted that:

In summer 1988, the first year of GCSE, the SEG lost one-third of the total entry which the five original boards had attracted for O level and CSE examinations in 1987, but the SEG was still operating in 1989 with the same number of office premises and broadly the same numbers of staff.
(AEB 2004)

By working hard at improving unpopular syllabuses, buying out the Oxford Board's share of SEG and closing regional offices, the AEB managed to regain its market share and recover gradually. Although initially bruised by its early experience of the modern market, the AEB managed to adapt to the GCSE effect. It was the next qualification change that would have more serious repercussions for this board.

The hard-hit London board, its location perhaps symbolic as a supplicant just outside the gates of the University of London's Senate House, had always been kept on a strict financial regime by the university, and with the advent of GCSE faced a more uncertain future. Its principal client group, the grammar schools, were a vanishing breed as comprehensive schools gradually replaced them. Regional loyalty seemed non-existent in the capital and the home counties, and its GCSE syllabuses failed to attract new adherents. (Sturgis 2000: 34) It was clear to the inner circle of examining boards managers at the time that London was in crisis, as one from another board recalls:

London's motives were simply to find someone who could bail them out. Financially they were in a very difficult position, and [London Board's Chief Executive], who I know very well, told me at the time that if he hadn't pulled this off, which is the one [merger] with BTEC, he was simply going to say, 'The system just can't stand it; we've got to have the one, single awarding body.' Now actually I don't think that would have solved the problem either in that context, but that's what he said to me.
(OCR2 2003)

In the highly marketised ambience of the 1990s, the London Board's still-solid academic reputation linked to financial weakness made it an attractive target for takeover.

As the education market began to take hold, it should be made clear that the marketising of public services as a fundamental part of the Conservative Government's ideology was being widely criticised. Many voices were raised to question the efficacy of the market philosophy within the public sector generally and specifically within education. To take just three examples: in 1992, Edwards and Whitty reflected on the concept of parental choice and questioned "[the] *optimism about the capacity of a 'free' educational market to guarantee a raising of standards and a breaking up of the 'monolith' for the benefit of all*" (Edwards and Whitty 1992: 114). Others, who examined the conceptual terrain and found that market proponents claimed "*that there is general benefit from competitive self-interest*", concluded that "*ultimately, markets operate according to the logic of profit, only in certain sets of interests and let the 'weak' go to the wall.*" (Kenway, Bigum 1993: 120) In a statistician's criticism of the validity and reliability of the 'league table' comparisons of schools which marketisation introduced, the creator of multi-level modelling suggested that "*these contributions have so much statistical uncertainty attaching to them that it is impossible reliably to make valid comparisons between most schools*" (Goldstein 1998: 8).

While these critiques questioned marketisation as it affected schools, there was no corresponding voice raised to ask whether requiring examining boards to form a more vigorously competitive market would be of benefit to their performance. Once more the Boards were overlooked by academia. However there was certainly disquiet within at least one board:

...I am so out of sympathy with the notion that examination boards compete in a market fashion: the notion or perception that they do. There has been an increased emphasis on this, I think to the detriment of the educational qualities and characteristics of the...boards which in my judgement ought to be part of the educational scene, and providing the service that gives voice and public credibility to the attainments of students in schools. You could say that in some senses competition in one form or another has always existed. But what has happened in a very damaging way is that the emphasis on competition has come as much from outside factors, in terms of the regulators, in terms of government policy...and boards themselves have had to look very much more to their marketing as a means of ensuring that schools see them as the body that they've got to put their students into. But I think at the end of the day the only two real factors which will attract students are the nature of the specifications [syllabuses] and the service which an examination board gives.

(AQA2 2003)

Despite such reservations about the market, the Boards duly made attempts to market themselves more effectively. Yet theirs was certainly not a market in the true sense. The overall number of 'clients' was fixed. There was no real price sensitivity: "...evidence suggests that marketing in the sense of pricing doesn't actually influence the choices" (AQA2 2003), possibly because the teachers who select the syllabuses don't pay the examining fee. The 'product' was increasingly externally controlled. The issue that arose as to which board should bear the commercial burden of running uneconomic small entry subjects illustrates that market rules do not really apply. A leading member of the regulatory body recalls that the "*sense of providing a service*" won out over market considerations to resolve the matter:

A really good example of behaviour there was in the small entry languages, where we [the regulator] actually weighed in. Do you remember, there were nearly diplomatic incidents when Portuguese looked to be under threat? This country's oldest ally? So, the sort of dealing that we did then was only possible

because people did have a sense of providing a service. And people shared the pain, didn't they? There was also the recognition that if you wanted access to the market, if you wanted to be one of these organisations that was given the right to offer GCSE English, for example, then there was an expectation that you offered a fuller portfolio: that you couldn't really cherry-pick. That wasn't going to be sustainable and there'd be public opprobrium if you did that – certainly ministerial opprobrium and doubtless regulatory opprobrium too. So I guess it's a bit of a mix really, of old-style service mentality and recognition of the realities, the market realities.
(QCA2 2003)

Nevertheless competition in the qualifications market was about to become more intense.

In a clear instance of the inter-relationship of developments in this period, the incorporation of Further Education and 6th-Form colleges was underwritten by a new funding mechanism. Their funding, provided by a new national Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), would be directly related to student numbers and 'successful outcomes' – which meant attaining qualifications. The consequence was that all post-16 providers began to compete seriously for students. Once again, this market was not a real one. The cohort of traditional A-level students tended to follow the route their predecessors had taken, whether to a school sixth form or a college. Thus it was the non-traditional 6th-formers who, as a form of 'floating voter', became the prime targets for competitive recruitment. Since so many of these students were likely to choose or more often be guided towards the new GNVQ courses, there was a clear opportunity to promote to teachers a particular provider's version of that qualification.

At this point, the vocational body BTEC found itself in the advantageous position of being the 'brand of choice' for providing GNVQs (Edexcel 2000). Long successful within further education through its Certificates, Diplomas and HNDs, BTEC was able to acquire an instant foothold within the much wider market of sixth forms

through the newly created GNVQ. Its solid reputation among further education teachers as an established provider enabled BTEC to become also the favoured brand for staff in schools who were faced with selecting a provider from among the three vocational bodies offering the new qualification. The other two were City & Guilds and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). City & Guilds was well known for its vocational qualifications but viewed with some misgivings by teachers who'd been involved during the 1980s with its Foundation Courses and then the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education; its organisational infrastructure had been inadequate and there were doubts that it would cope successfully with a new style of qualification.⁷ The RSA's examinations section had a strong reputation for its clerical skills certificates, but it had no record in new GNVQ areas like Health & Social Care, or Leisure & Tourism which most post-16 institutions intended to offer.

The result was that BTEC garnered the lion's share of entries for the GNVQ's initial five subject areas. By 1999, when the newly-formed AQA was faced with buying out City & Guilds' GNVQ qualifications, they learned that Edexcel [BTEC's merged title] was providing 70% of GNVQs nationally. This success was financially very rewarding since the entry fee per student was set at £65 and the only external assessment BTEC provided for the fee took the form of brief multiple-choice tests, with a one-off visit from a BTEC moderator to check final portfolios whose detailed marking had been done by teachers. This meant that, atypically in the world of qualifications, BTEC was in a sound financial position.

With a new Chief Executive from outside the examining board world, BTEC was about to set in motion another feature of the commercial market: the takeover. What had been happening gradually within the Boards since the introduction of GCSE

could in hindsight be described as a series of takeovers and mergers. But they had proceeded at a decorous pace and above all were instigated by the Boards without any outside prompting. During the 1990s the pace accelerated rapidly and for those reluctant to move there was external pressure, if not directly from a Minister, at least very definitely from one civil servant whose *diktat* impressed representatives of two different Boards:

I can remember when [a senior DfEE official], DfES – or DfEE, rather – came into a room...to tell us about what was going on and “There’ll be three [awarding bodies].” It was in the basement of Sanctuary Buildings...and he made this statement. We’d had a meeting with him, and this was right at the end. And [AEB’s Secretary General] then went to [NEAB’s Director] and said, “... We’ve got some serious talking to do!”

(OCR2 2003)

A second version of the incident was equally precise:

...I can’t remember whether there was any... whether it was ever said that there had to be a merger of some bodies in order to create those boards, but the writing was very much on the wall that that sort of coming together was needed. And I do recall, and I even recall the date on this: the twelfth of December, 1997, sorry 1996, a meeting in the Department where [a senior DfEE official] really made it clear that the expectation would be that there would be only three unitary awarding bodies.

(AQA2 2003)

The external pressure was therefore made very explicit to the Boards, and although markets encouraged choice, in this instance there was to be no choice if a board wanted to continue to be accredited as an English awarding body. Yet there remained within the regulator the rather naïve impression that the mergers were all voluntary on the part of the Boards:

I think there’s some sort of educational logic underpinning the linkage between general and vocational, which was part of the story anyway that led to the creation of current unitary authorities. I remember – I think I might have even coined the word ‘unitary’ in that context at the time – and that sort of stimulated, on the one hand by evolutionary pressures that arose from just review and reflection on the examining system and how well it was working but on the other hand political pressures, with ministers having views about what might constitute an appropriate number of awarding bodies. Then those two things coming together in a fairly mysterious way to lead to the creation of the unitary bodies. And that was interesting, because, of course, ministers have no power to tell the examining boards to do this. They put pressure on, they

encouraged them, they said “Patently, we think this is a good idea.” But there – I suppose there were implicit threats that something unpleasant might happen if the boards didn’t want to go that way. But I’m not quite sure what they might have been because, had the boards stood their ground and said, “Actually, no, we’d rather do it this way, I guess ...they could have done that. And it’s interesting to speculate what might have happened had they chosen to do that. I presume, since they didn’t do that they broadly agreed with the philosophy: that a degree of rationalisation, and certainly a degree of greater coherence between the general and the vocational was desirable. So they went along with it – I mean, apart from all the sort of difficulties of deciding which partners quite to work with – there didn’t seem to be any objection in principle to the idea of that degree of unification.

(QCA2 2003)

It is particularly curious to note that this experienced member of the regulatory body didn’t recall that the “*something unpleasant that might happen if the boards didn’t want to go that way*” was indeed a very significant power in the hands of that very regulator: a Board could lose its accreditation as a recognised provider of qualifications in England. While Cambridge, with its sound international business stream, might have been able to survive such a loss, it would have been instantly fatal to any other awarding body. This evidence indicates that at least some in the regulatory body were not acknowledging the degree of control they had acquired over the Boards. Equally, the process of general or academic and vocational awarding bodies coming together was “*fairly mysterious*” only in the case of Cambridge – which has always moved in a mysterious way. The other two instances of takeover and merger were based – from the examining boards’ perspective – on simple survival. Before moving to a detailed consideration of these moves, it is important to note the influence on the Boards of yet another strand in the 1990s marketised *zeitgeist*: the idea that the merging or unifying of disparate entities strengthened them.

2 The Unification Principle

The desirability of unification seemed to apply whether in the case of a high-street bank like the Midland, bought out by the Hong Kong and Shanghai International Bank to add to its global brand HSBC or trade unions like NALGO and NUPE, which merged to form the giant UNISON. Within “*the education state*”, the first significant move demonstrated a symbolic acknowledgement of the growing conviction that the nation’s economy was going to be linked increasingly with its ‘human capital’ in the form of the skills level of its workforce. Early indications of this trend dated from the mid-1980s when the Manpower Services Commission section of the Department of Employment had devised – and funded – experiential learning schemes like the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) described above. The merger of the Departments of Education and Employment (DfEE) in 1995 was concrete recognition of the perceived inter-connection of these two agencies.

An interpretation of the pressures for unification based on purely educational factors suggested that:

The unification process in England can be seen...as an evolving reaction to a range of pressures – problems of maintaining standards and creating parity of esteem in a divided qualifications system [such as the] effects of the marketisation of awarding bodies.... It can be argued therefore that pressures to regulate and co-ordinate a divided and voluntarist system set in motion a rolling and evolving process starting with the merged DfEE, the formation of QCA and then the rationalisation of awarding bodies.

(Spours 1998: 13)

Unifying Departments

Certainly a first move in the unification process affecting the world of education was the merger in 1995 of the 30-year-old Department of Education and Science (DES) with the huge Department of Employment to form the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), an enormous ministry which was based in Sanctuary Buildings in Great Smith Street, from which it overflowed to many subsidiary offices. The significance of the merger was made clear by David Blunket, Secretary of State for this new behemoth, in a speech to the Institute of Economic Affairs on 24 January 2001:

The unique importance of DfEE's role stems from its responsibility for ensuring that the UK has a well-functioning labour market. It is here that we are clarifying the economic relationship between the citizen and the government – a relationship of rights and responsibility, with the goal of ensuring both economic efficiency and fairness for all.

Since the amalgamation of the Department for Education with the Employment Department there has been a much clearer national and international understanding of the synergy between education and employment policies, which is so vital to the global competitiveness of the British economy.

(Blunkett 2001: 2-3)

By clearly placing education as an element in the labour market, Blunkett indicated both what might in his terms be described as a 'synergy' between his government's view of education and that of his right-wing audience and the department's responsibility for justifying educational investment according to its "*social rate of return*" (Blunkett 2001: 8). This expression of the ideology of the "*managerial state*" shows how the concept of the link between education and the economy had moved on since Callaghan's Ruskin speech in 1976. It offers a rationale for the interventionist policies which were being implemented across the public sector, and makes the case for joining previously disparate departments. When after the general election later in 2001 this synergy was deemed no longer to be effective and the two departments were

separated into the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), David Blunkett was not called on to explain the change. He had been appointed Home Secretary and replaced at the DfES by Estelle Morris. The department's new title signified that its remit went beyond educational institutions to include the skills level of the wider population. But changing its partner did not signify a reduction in its powers: rather the reverse would be seen to be the case during the crisis of September 2002.

With this great expansion of the department, the status and influence of the Minister had greatly increased. Added to the major increase in named ministerial powers accorded by the 1988 Education Reform Act, the effect of the merger was to add weight to the habitual claim of civil servants when challenged by the Boards over a particular issue. The view of several interviewees was summed up by an OCR official: “*‘It’s with the Minister’ means it’s civil servants*” (OCR2 2003). Now the Minister's increased power, or that of his civil servants, made the success of any challenge by the examining boards very unlikely. For this study, in addition to underlining increasing central power, the significance of these changes was to indicate that unification had moved into education, where it was to have an unprecedented impact on the examining boards.

Unifying Regulatory Bodies

The series of changes to the bodies which have regulated the examinations system is illustrated in **Figure 4.2**. A principal exponent of the virtues of unifying agencies was Sir Ron Dearing. However his motives were based not on market principles but on his

deep-rooted conviction that, as he recalled in a recent interview, “*the idea of building the credibility of work-based learning and increasing the flexibility of the academic side was worth pursuing*” (Dearing 2003).

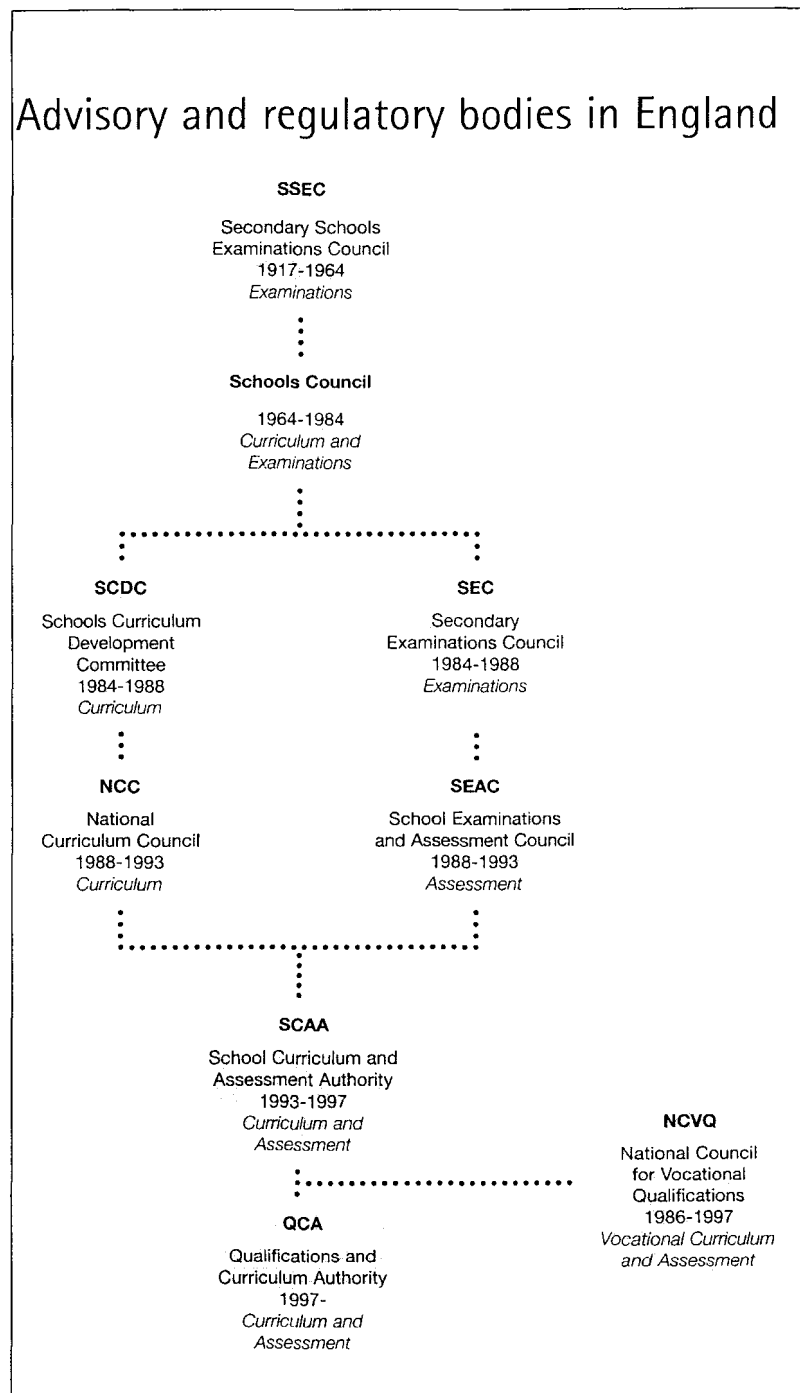
Dearing had first-hand experience of the unifying of regulatory agencies when in 1994, to general approval, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) and the Secondary Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) merged to form the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), with Ron Dearing in the chair. Since their creation in 1989, rumours had proliferated of tensions and rivalries between the NCC in its pleasant canal-side offices in York and the SEAC, which existed in more of a rabbit warren in Notting Hill Gate. Whether or not there was any substance to such rumours, the stated objective in merging them was the logical one of seeking coherence between the bodies regulating both the curriculum’s structure and the means of assessing pupils. In this merger too the examining boards experienced a shift in the balance of power: the unification of the curriculum and assessment bodies lent greater weight to judgements emerging from SCAA.

Another continuing concern was ensuring the validity of the new vocational qualification, the GNVQ. As Chair of SCAA, Ron Dearing had an *ex officio* seat on the body that had been established to regulate vocational qualifications, an arrangement which made him “*familiar with both sides of the equation*” (Dearing 2003). The equation in question involved the new qualification that NCVQ had designed. The regulatory arrangement for the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) paralleled that between SCAA and the examining boards. The three vocational bodies BTEC, City & Guilds and RSA had developed the new

qualification, submitting each stage of their proposals to the NCVQ, who “*laid down preconditions for approval*” (Wolf 2002a: 218).

Despite the success of GNVQ courses in attracting students in school 6th forms and and both 6th-form and FE colleges, widespread criticisms of the assessment process were a major factor leading to the Government’s request that Sir Ron Dearing investigate and report on post-16 qualifications. It was not surprising that one of his 1996 Report’s recommendations was that the academic and vocational regulatory bodies – SCAA and NCVQ – should unite. Dearing’s place on the vocational body’s Council had enabled the development of an “*interesting dynamic*” with John Capey,

Figure 4-2 Changes to the Regulator



(Tattersall 2003: 18)

who chaired NCVQ. A QCA official who had been closely involved in drafting the Cahey Report⁸ observed that:

Dearing always had a word with Cahey after every meeting to find out where we were going, and it was interesting that some of the very – if you read the Cahey Report – [suggestions were] deeply tentative about what was needed. But kind of a month later in the Dearing [Report] it was set in stone....
(QCA3 2004)

What Dearing set in stone was based on his profound hope that the ever-elusive ‘parity of esteem’ between academic and vocational qualifications would develop from a unified regulatory body and what were described as ‘unitary awarding bodies’.

Dearing was convinced that a ‘three-track’ qualifications system – academic, general vocational and specific vocational – was the way forward for England. From his informed perspective, but even more from his personal philosophical conviction, he believed that the way to build public confidence in the new GNVQ and NVQ qualifications would be for the regulation and assessment for the whole range of qualifications to reside with single organisations which would erase the “*binary line, as a frontier that largely divides the awarding and regulatory bodies, [and] symbolises and enshrines the way we categorise achievement*” (Dearing 1996: 29).

Dearing wanted to transfer to the new qualifications the examining boards’ established expertise. An assessment expert explained the effect he was seeking:

...the ‘track record’ of awarders creates something akin to what art historians call provenance, which is of crucial importance in establishing the credibility of the awards. Awarding bodies understand this very well, which is why they often appear cautious with new developments. Any new system of awards will be treated very suspiciously by users until their awards have similar provenance.
(Wiliam 1996: 304)

To oversee the arrangement he was proposing, Sir Ron recommended the amalgamation of the academic and vocational regulators - SCAA and NCVQ. The unification of the two agencies took place in 1997, when the Qualifications and

Curriculum Authority (QCA) subsumed SCAA and NCVQ and set up new offices in Piccadilly. But this time, there was an additional factor that went beyond all previous moves toward unification. An examining board manager was all too aware of the important change in the status of the unified regulator:

The fundamental change in regulation was the statutory regulation that came with QCA. Because nothing was statutory before that. And the fact that you've got statutory regulation means that you're backed up by a law which means they could step in, they could come and see our books, for no...very strong reasons, really. There's only one other organisation that can walk in and look at your books and that is Customs & Excise. But they can. The Secretary of State can just say, "Go and see their books." I think that changed the relationship quite significantly.
(OCR2 2003)

QCA was described as “in many ways a classic late-twentieth century quango – officially independent of its parent department, but in practice highly dependent on the ministry that created and pays for it” (Wolf 2002b: 216). Dearing indicated in his Report that he was aware of some potential pitfalls in his recommendations. He spelled out possible “disadvantages of a full merger” [of NCVQ and SCAA]:

- *The concentration of power and influence in one body, in an area of key national importance.*
- *A risk that the strength of the systems developed over the decades for the academic awards, and the standing they have with the universities, could lead to these approaches superseding those valued by industry.*
- *A very demanding role for the chairman/woman and members of the Authority.*
- *The risk that to cover all interests adequately, the membership of the controlling body could become large and cumbersome, with an associated loss of effectiveness.*

(Dearing 1996: 32)

Looking back after nine years, he acknowledged ruefully that, “*Well, I recall that there is one page in the Report – I can’t tell you which one, but it’s there if you read it – where I predicted most of the things that might happen and subsequently have*” (Dearing 2003).

Because he produced his reports during an active retirement, it is unsurprising that he had not foreseen another potential problem that might result from the changes he was recommending. However, younger policy makers should perhaps been aware that changing organisations was not a simple matter. As an outcome of the 1980s takeover frenzy and the 1990s fondness for ‘downsizing’ organisations, the subject of ‘the management of change’ had become something of a growth industry in management literature. For example, in August 2003, a search of the Institute of Education library catalogue using the key words ‘management of change’ produced 295 records. Yet while in each instance of merger detailed above there was a certain logic in the minds of policy makers, none of their plans seemed to indicate any awareness of the potential hazards of organisational change. This was a surprising oversight at a time when the writings of both serious academics like Michael Eraut (Eraut 1985) and management gurus like Charles Handy (Handy 1995) had made something of a cliché of the idea that if it were to succeed, change required careful management. Both academic research and organisational experience confirmed that if change were to bring hoped-for improvements, it must be planned with care and each stage introduced with the support of the staff who would implement any new system. Yet these major changes were imposed with no apparent expectation that they would have any repercussions on the organisations involved. One person directly involved in one of these restructurings – he was Director of Research at NCVQ and about to move

from the Euston road to QCA in Piccadilly – expressed some reservations about all these mergers and reflected on the possible effects:

These are not simple transformations. These organizations have different cultures and curriculum principles: it is in this process of transformation of apparatus that particular views about assessment and learning, coherence and diversity will be in strong competition. In matters of assessment the details count. The details will emerge from the mergers, the discussions on the characteristics of A/AS, GNVQs and NVQs and the outcomes of pilots of new approaches. That is why precise predictions are extremely hard to make. One new form of consensus is arising in the discussions on assessment across the system and that is that three factors are dominant: rigour, cost and manageability. One feature shines through – increased central control through qualifications.

(Oates 1997: 146)

However, Ron Dearing was intent upon the need “*to make explicit the equal standing of academic, applied and vocational qualifications....*” (Dearing 1996: 12). His background as a successful non-academic who had made his reputation within the Post Office lent credibility to his commitment to abolishing the ‘binary line’ that had always divided the academic from the vocational. He recalled the rationale for his recommendations clearly when interviewed:

I believed there would be substantial benefits from the bringing together of the long experience that SCAA represented with the new approaches NCVQ had introduced such as departing from written assessment as the only reliable measure. There is a need for people to be able to talk about how to do things – both in the workplace and in fact anywhere.

(Dearing 2003)

His recommendation of the merging of the regulatory bodies – SCAA and NCVQ – was tested, as had now become standard practice, through quick soundings taken by means of a DfEE consultation entitled *Building the Framework*. The merger took place in 1997. However, as seems usually the case when organisations merge, the entity that emerged in new premises at 83 Piccadilly was not simply a sum of its constituent parts. The new body, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), was perceived by many observers to be dominated by officials from SCAA. This view

was confirmed in a subsequent interview by one who was directly involved in the merger:

...The merger, when NCVQ joined SCAA to become QCA, ...was seen in terms of fairly hostile power struggles, and who's winning out.... And I think it was quite clear that in that sense the power had gone to the SCAA traditional exams section. And, again, those who moved over I think felt very much [that] they were second class, just like vocational qualifications – in pay scales and this, that and the other.... But all that was indicative of this feeling that nobody really cared about occupational and vocational qualifications. That wasn't where the action was. It was to do with national curriculum stuff and conventional, general examinations. So an interesting struggle there...with quite a few NVQ [staff] moving off, retiring and that kind of thing.
(QCA2 2004)

Ecclestone, in her interviews regarding the policy debates around GNVQ assessment, found a similarly dominant academic bias, not only within the regulator but more widely:

An academic tradition, deriving from 'cultural restorationist' ideas about norm-referenced 'standards' rooted in subject knowledge, was represented by civil servants in the ex-DES and DfE, ministers, ex-SCAA officials and OFSTED inspectors. These constituencies were much more influential inside policy than the 'vocational modernisers' and 'liberal humanists' represented by civil servants in the ex-ED, officials in NCVQ, FEU and the awarding bodies, and the FEFC inspectorate.
(Ecclestone 2002: 173)

Evidence of the balance of power was provided by subsequent changes to GNVQs. QCA required adaptations to the assessment system to reflect more traditional approaches. “...external assessment, now termed ‘independent’ assessment, would be seen as a prime instrument of accountability” (Spours 1998: 12). It seemed that the very innovations that NCVQ had inspired to shape a new qualification suited to different learning styles in the post-16 population had lost out as a result of the powerful reliance on the A-level model as the ‘gold standard’. Many teachers felt that rather than bridging the academic/vocational divide, the effect was that GNVQs were being moved across that divide to replicate the academic model of assessment. (BusinessStudies 2002) Others concerned over the weaknesses in GNVQ assessment

felt that it made sense to bestow on the new GNVQs the reliability conferred by the examining boards' long history of A-level examining. The major differences in assessing practical as opposed to theoretical performance were not considered problematic – except by those directly concerned. The Chief Executive of City and Guilds had expressed his own continuing reservations about 'gap bridging':

I have real problems relating to the attitude of the academic awarding bodies towards vocational training and accreditation of training, and I think it's endemic in the country – the attitudes towards craft versus academic skills. There are some very strong prevailing...social snobberies associated with 'it's better to have been to university than it is to be a plumber.'
...I think it is probably far more appropriate to leave the accreditation of vocational training to those organisations who understand it such as City and Guilds...and to leave the [assessment of] academic or full-time education to those people who understand that.
 (City & Guilds 2000)

This view was not shared by everyone. Many – who later expressed their concerns during the *Guaranteeing Standards* consultation in 1997 – were disappointed that the Dearing Report did not address the problem of the many workplace qualification providers. In connection with NVQs, Dearing had mildly suggested that “*Government departments should consider ways of encouraging a reduction in the number of awarding bodies (currently over 100) awarding NVQs*”. There was no such diffidence in the section of his report devoted to “*The regulatory and awarding bodies*” (Dearing 1996: 28).

Unifying 'Awarding Bodies': Takeovers, Mergers and 'one-stop shops'

Dearing was very clear that bringing together the examining boards and the vocational bodies administering GNVQ could both “*unify the present binary structure*” and through reducing “*the excessive proliferation of awards*” ensure “*parity of standards*”

across the whole field” (Dearing 1996: 29). Of the 35 paragraphs in that section of his report, only five were concerned specifically with “*The awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*”. However the points he made in relation to the English providers of GCSE, A levels and the GNVQ lacked any ambiguity:

The objective should be to reduce the total number of bodies making awards. Except through joint awarding arrangements, no GCSE or A level awarding body should be authorised to award the GNVQ, and none of the three bodies awarding the GNVQ should be authorised to offer A level awards, or to extend the present provision of GCSEs, except in partnership with a body already authorised to make those awards.
(Dearing 1996: 30)

Before considering the movement among the Boards precipitated by the above recommendation, it is important to note a significant change in language that was formalised in the Dearing Report. Although the principles of discourse analysis are primarily useful for “*attempting to bring certain methods to bear on qualitative data so as to produce rigour in presenting evidence*” (Cameron 2003), one can use the associated skills to reflect on the implications of the introduction of the term ‘unitary awarding bodies’.

The Dearing Report stressed ‘unitary’ as the important concept: if vocational and academic awards had the same provenance, it was hoped that they would be deemed of comparable reliability. The change from ‘examining boards’ to ‘awarding bodies’ has, so far as one can tell, escaped comment. Yet this shift in terminology suggests a shift in function. No longer are they ‘boards’ with overtones of an elite selecting or rejecting applicants; they become the more neutral ‘bodies’. Even more telling is replacing ‘examining’ – a process involving passing or failing – with ‘awarding’. No negative outcome stems from an award. This linguistic means of changing the role of these organisations sent a subtle message about their changed status. Yet it was

apparently too subtle for the public at large to absorb, as was seen in the misunderstandings inherent in the debate over standards, to be considered below.

The examining boards had not simply stood still while the unification movement was gathering momentum around them. However, the Dearing Report's recommendations had suggested that "*the process of awarding bodies coming together across the binary line should be encouraged by the Government*" (Dearing 1996: 30), and this suggestion was quickly acted upon. Dearing's clear message led Gillian Shephard, the Secretary of State for Education, to launch in February 1997 a consultation to collect views about the appropriate future shape of awarding bodies. Naturally, civil servants at the DfEE designed this consultation paper: *Guaranteeing Standards*. With its title indicating clearly the stated objective, the language of this 'consultation' was reminiscent of the Latin structure of 'questions expecting the answer yes'. Core questions began, "*Do you agree...?*" It proposed a reduction in the number of unitary awarding bodies which would offer a reduced number of academic syllabuses together with GNVQ qualifications. It was perhaps unsurprising that many did agree. Despite the attachment of teachers in England to their right to choose from a range of syllabuses and different Boards, widespread concerns about comparability of standards weighed more heavily in the end with their representative bodies' responses to the consultation. The education world's response to *Guaranteeing Standards* showed support for unitary awarding bodies which would deliver a reduced number of both academic and GNVQ qualifications. The only major objection came from those who had hoped for a more radical unification. Many, from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI 1997) to the newly-formed and ambitious Edexcel awarding body (Edexcel 1997), were disappointed that there was to be no attempt to bring the fully vocational NVQ qualifications under the same umbrella as A levels and

GNVQs. Once again the longstanding tradition of regarding work-based qualifications as outside the province of education had prevailed. Disappointment with this stance was articulated strongly by the one-time Chief Executive of RSA Examinations:

I would be a strong supporter of eliminating artificial barriers between types of qualifications. But they may even have created a still starker barrier because it was only about GNVQs. NVQs and other vocational qualifications were explicitly excluded from the proposals. It...led to something that I personally deplore, and that's a stark divide between school qualifications and qualifications for post-compulsory [sic] rather than a system that would allow credits and so on, but that was prevented.
(OCR1 2000)

Once again the English tradition of regarding work-based qualifications as outside the province of education had prevailed. Instead, like the Dearing Report in reference to NVQs, the document made rather vague exhortations to “*rationalise... the sectoral training*” and other improvements which “*are likely to be carried forward with the creation of the QCA*” (DfEE 1997a).

This reservation apart, it seemed clear that merging the awarding bodies was generally seen as a positive step. The awarding bodies themselves, in a united response from ‘The Joint Forum for the GCSE and GCE’ and the ‘Joint Council of National Vocational Awarding Bodies’, broadly accepted the Dearing vision and the concept of a national qualifications framework, but sounded a warning note. Observing that although the consultation paper suggested the benefits of reducing the number of Boards, it overlooked other outcomes that might be less positive:

*An imposed reduction in the number of boards:
is no guarantee of improved standards;
will reduce the possibilities for, or prevent, a dissatisfied centre from seeking better service elsewhere;
is likely to be at the expense of the guiding principles [ownership, responsiveness, innovation, motivation, continuity] set out above;
could create new and unwelcome barriers between GCSE, A levels, GNVQs and vocational qualifications such as NVQs;
will be costly and time consuming;*

runs a high risk of disrupting the examination system at a time when major changes to A, AS and GNVQ courses are being introduced.

(Tattersall and Townsend 1997)

Their views were perhaps dismissed as predictable objections. With hindsight, one might suggest that had more effort been made to accommodate these points, particularly the last, later problems might have been avoided.

Despite the intervening election of May 1997 in which a Labour Government ended 18 years of Conservative control – in June the results of the consultation were published under the name of the new Junior Minister, Baroness Blackstone. The impulse for increased central control crossed party lines – or perhaps originated from the civil servants within the DfEE. The outcome meant that examining boards had to offer both academic and GNVQ qualifications if they were to continue to be accredited as English qualifications providers.

In the space of 13 years, the examining boards had worked with SEC, SEAC, SCAA and QCA as the education department mutated from the DES to the DfEE to the DfES. With each change the central control tightened and the Boards were experiencing – but not openly acknowledging – a change from autonomy to dependency. They were perhaps preoccupied by the changes they were undergoing within their own organisational structures. In two of the three eventual organisations, the process of unification was underway before *Guaranteeing Standards* made it obligatory. In each of the three cases the motivation and process was very particular: there was no typical pattern.

BTEC takes over the London Board

The decade's first overt move towards unification among the examining boards resulted from the recognition of potential mutual benefit. It was initiated by two

individuals who had not been inhibited by the usual long service of most of those working in the examining world. A new Chief Executive had moved to the London Board – after a career as a secondary head teacher, then a local authority administrator. As the 1990s opened, he was considering retirement and was motivated by a desire to avoid being responsible for the demise of the University of London Examining and Assessment Consortium (ULEAC), as the London GCE Board and its GCSE arm the London and East Anglia Group (LEAG) were now known, because of its dire financial circumstances. By happy chance, BTEC's new Chief Executive was simultaneously looking for a means of expanding into the schools sector:

[The London CEO] really initiated discussions, as he realised London was the smallest board after GCSE, and was looking for a partner. The two of us had some initial talks, and then...it was more to do with who bought who. So we bought them out, in effect. And buying out was not a sum of money, but an agreement to continue to rent the building, to be supportive, but to make sure there was enough blue water between ourselves and the University.
(Edexcel3 2004)

The other Boards were perhaps slow to recognise the significance of the creation of the new body Edexcel, described in significantly commercial terms as a 'one-stop shop' where schools could find either academic or vocational qualifications. When the new body was announced at their annual Joint Council Conference in Norwich in September 1995, the general view of the other Boards was that it was a predictable move given the desperation of the London Board and the ambition of BTEC. They did not at that point see it as a form of handwriting on the wall for themselves.

The new organisation “*needed to make a profit because we needed to invest*” (Edexcel1 2000) – not least because their building in Russell Square needed major upgrading after years of under-investment by the University of London.

London University did not run London Exams with its own finance director or its own HR director, and it used the University of London backup facilities.... We picked up London Exams, which had not been invested in for many years,

and that meant putting PCs on people's desks, it meant cabling this building – so, so far it's been costs.
(Edexcel 2000)

To the managers of the other examining boards, steeped in their established culture, this seemed less the style of an educationist than that of a commercial company manager. The new organisation's Chief Executive expressed “*strong support for competition*” with a regulator not like the existing educationally-based Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) but “*looking to models from the privatised utilities*” (Spours 1997a). This was a clear challenge to the other qualification providers. Marketised competition had truly entered what had been a quiet commercial backwater.

Although opting voluntarily for unification, the newly merged BTEC did not accede to the expectations of either NCVQ or Lord Dearing and quietly phase out its BTEC qualifications in favour of the new GNVQ. Just as in the 1980s when NVQs were created, it had “*resisted angrily and young people continued to register for BTEC awards in preference to NVQs*” (Wolf 2002a: 220), Edexcel retained its successful suite of BTEC qualifications and engaged in “*...a squabble with...the old NCVQ who very much opposed the fact that we wanted to keep our BTECs. But we fought for the BTEC. It was a good alternative*” (Edexcel3 2004).

Despite retaining its BTECs and its dominance of the GNVQ sector, of which it had captured about 75% of candidates, Edexcel couldn't manage to increase its share of the mainstream A-level and GCSE market. This left it financially fragile and therefore vulnerable to another takeover, which occurred following the problems it faced in 2002.

The Cambridge ‘Brand’: A global fish that swallows minnows

In another part of the examining world, a very different series of take-overs had been quietly taking place which were based not on competition but on control. The University of Cambridge had never in its long history yielded control over any of its constituent parts to any other body, and it was not about to begin with the minor matter of its examining ‘business stream’.

The data in this section comes almost entirely from the interview I conducted with a representative of what is now the OCR awarding body. While one would normally research a variety of sources to achieve a balanced account, in the case of the University of Cambridge this is not really an option. The complex and secretive nature of its internal structures makes it virtually impossible for a researcher to gain access to the decision-making processes that lie behind its operations. Therefore, I found it both unexpected and illuminating when in the course of an interview the subject broached of his own accord the series of takeovers Cambridge’s examining arm – known since its Victorian birth as the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES)⁹ – has pursued in recent years.

When asked for his perspective on the examining boards in the 1990s, he felt that he could better locate his recollections:

...a bit earlier than that. I first came to UCLES in 1985.... At that time there were 22 exam boards...and we were in the burgeoning Midland Exam Group, and there were five of us: Southern Universities Joint Board (Bristol and Southampton I think), Oxford & Cambridge [Joint Board], Cambridge, West Midlands and East Midlands [CSE Boards]. Interesting Group, determined by the Government. Cambridge was already talking to SUJB and ...within three or four years...had absorbed SUJB. That was painless. Utterly and completely painless. Not much of the SUJB to absorb, in truth: offices in Bristol – both very classical examination boards, looked the same. SUJB was losing money, the universities of the south didn’t want to carry on. So that was simple. Relatively.

(OCR2 2003)

This explanation of the hitherto mysterious disappearance of the Southern Universities GCE Board is included to establish Cambridge's *modus operandi* in the matter of takeovers: a process described as 'absorbing' and one that proceeds slowly, away from media headlines. This minor episode in examining board history has not, to the best of my knowledge, been chronicled elsewhere simply because of the university's consistent silence on its operations.

This slow but inexorable process of Cambridge-style expansion continued for the next ten years, with only the final one – the creation of OCR – occasioning any significant publicity. Another feature of the Cambridge approach was that, unlike most such operations, finance was never a major consideration. This was clear from the interviewee's recollection of the creation of the GCSE Midland Examining Group:

The Midland Examining Group was interesting then [following the absorption of SUJB]. It was left with four: two GCE boards and two CSE boards. The two CSE boards, West Midlands and East Midlands, were the soundest financially of all the CSE boards – north, south or middle. Both of them remained sound right through to being absorbed. So there was no financial worry about MEG in that context. In terms of GCE boards, Cambridge was as sound as anything can be. Oxford & Cambridge was...not really. But we weren't aware of that at the time in the late 80s as we came into MEG.

(OCR2 2003)

It seemed that this successful federation of four Boards felt that, as the other GCSE Groups gradually formed single organisations, "*MEG's federation was standing out a bit.*" Then began another series of discussions "*all around the shop*" between Cambridge and the West Midlands Board. They eventually came to an agreement that West Midlands would sell its GCSE interest to Cambridge. Within twelve months the East Midlands decided to merge with (*ie*, be absorbed by) UCLES. By 1993, the remaining anomaly was "*the Oxford & Cambridge Board's end of the GCSE*". How to tidy up this anomaly:

...became a University discussion...and there was agreement that that should be taken on by UCLES as well. So effectively in 1993 MEG became a single organisation as part of UCLES...[with a] Chief Executive not in the sense that you had total independence, because you shared an awful lot with UCLES....UCLES has always been the parent.

(OCR2 2003)

Being the parent in this sense means having ultimate control, including financial responsibility. This consistent policy of retaining control suggests a potential for conflict with the parallel and equally strong tendency for central control over the examining boards. This conflict was to come to a head with the A-level crisis of September 2002, discussed in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, the various changes within the UCLES structure involved the need for “a culture shift for quite a few people”. MEG continued to flourish and “internally it wasn’t fighting too many battles. Much more of the battles [sic] were fought over the A level”. This was unsurprising when the complex moves taking place are described:

We had the Cambridge Board [and] independently the Oxford & Cambridge Board. In GCSE terms, Oxford Delegacy of course was in joint venture with the AEB. But there was the Oxford Board for A level, and the University of Oxford had decided that they didn’t really want to be in this much longer. So therefore it had only one organisation it was determined to talk to, and that was the University of Cambridge. So the two universities decided to sort out their exam boards. I expect you know that the Oxford & Cambridge Board has never been a single board. Not throughout all its history. It was two autonomous bits. The Cambridge end of Oxford & Cambridge was just another syndicate [committee] at the University of Cambridge, set up specifically in conjunction with a delegacy set up in Oxford which was just another delegacy [committee] of the University of Oxford, for a particular group of schools: the independent schools. Quite different in purpose to both the Oxford Delegacy and the Cambridge Syndicate. Completely autonomous except for a board – literally a board of people – who sat on top of them And this board came to an agreement to allocate subjects to their independent entities. So actually, when we came to the A level, we really had four bodies.

(OCR2 2003)

This exquisitely intricate arrangement – derived from the enduring principle of the need to ensure separate examination provision for the private sector by the two ancient universities neither of which would yield control to the other – seems

medieval in its complexity. It is unsurprising that none of this was understood in the wider world. It is also unsurprising that forging a single body from these four separate entities:

...was a much more contentious internal issue. These two universities, Cambridge and Oxford, as you will almost certainly know are very proud. And they're not really single entities. No, they're groups. And they were very proud of their patches. So there were a considerable number of people in various places in Oxford in particular who didn't actually want to do this. But nonetheless the universities did do it. So then we had, in 1996, the first exams – the deal was signed in 1995 – all the A level coming into the University of Cambridge Examinations Syndicate. That was a culture shift, that was. We therefore had, as we have now, the Southern Universities Exam Board, the two ends of the Oxford & Cambridge Exam Board, the Oxford Delegacy, the West Midlands and East Midlands...and Cambridge itself: six if not seven pieces wrapped into one.
(OCR2 2003)

When asked about how the A-level board Oxford & Cambridge Examinations and Assessment (OCEAC), which had appeared in the mid-1990s, fitted into the overall structure, the interviewee's the explanation was brisk:

Well, OCEAC – I missed OCEAC, yes. Well the OCEAC was a little sort of diversion in a sense because we had to do something with the Oxford end of Oxford & Cambridge, Cambridge end of Oxford & Cambridge and Cambridge at the time, so we created OCEAC but of course OCR came along very soon afterwards so OCEAC only survived for about three years, if that. [It was a very short-term thing...] Very short term thing, yes....
(OCR2 2003)

Despite the outward appearance of a single entity, the established Cambridge method of moving slowly when absorbing bodies was again followed, with the result that “*the first really common [OCR] A level exam was 2002*”. No reference was made in the interview to any possible effect of this as a factor in the problems of September of that same year; however it must be borne in mind when considering those events in a later section.

Certainly, with all of these internal changes grinding along, the decision to form OCR by buying out the GNVQ provision of the RSA's Examinations Section was a

relatively simple one. However, incorporating yet another change seemed the precipitating factor in a transformation of UCLES' overall structure. An exceptionally long excerpt from the interview explains what might be termed the modernising of the venerable UCLES organisation:

Come 1998 and the formation of OCR, UCLES itself was transforming itself (and it's still doing that, but let's leave that for now). UCLES has a very big EFL [English as a Foreign Language] business – it's the second largest awarding body in the world in English for speakers of other language, and it has a large international.... So we had seriously to think about how we organised ourselves. So we then, as UCLES, decided that we would transform ourselves into business streams. One of those business streams was OCR. And the other business streams are Cambridge International Exams [GCSEs and A levels] and English for Speakers of Other Languages. We have a corporate organisation which is shared and is run by the group's Chief Executive. So we've got corporate IM [Internal Management] which is particularly important in corporate finance, and we [OCR] are becoming more and more now an UCLES organisation.

We are the largest awarding body – as UCLES – in the UK. But that isn't really visible to many people. One of the successful things that I think we managed to do internally...is to transform particularly the RSA into an OCR brand. The OCR did take on a name and has become known within the UK. Outside the UK, nobody had the foggiest idea of what it is...because Cambridge is the...brand.

So...there were quite a few internal stresses that were nothing to do with the external picture at all which had an impact on the organisation and in some cases more of an impact than anything that's happened outside. I think UCLES is still very strong. Well, I know it's very strong. It's had a very strong bottom line this year. We are supported quite a lot by how successful ESOL is. One of the gains that OCR gets is being part of UCLES. OCR is the only awarding body at the moment, as I understand it, over the last two years that has actually...not only breaks even, but actually has kept its head above water, as I look at the accounts of all the awarding bodies.

(OCR2 2003)

This extensive quotation has been included as evidence of two important factors. The first indicates that Cambridge will always ensure that it controls any body with which it becomes involved. The second is that its global brand in the flourishing ESOL market means that it is not subject to the financial pressures that affect the other two English awarding bodies. This basic position explains the lukewarm Cambridge response to the changes in the structure of 14-19 qualifications recommended by the

Tomlinson Committee in autumn 2004, discussed in the final chapter. For the ‘Cambridge Brand’, its international A levels were more important than OCR’s share of the English market.

The interviewee’s response to my questions as to external pressures on the board during the 1990s reinforced these themes, and indicated that :

*The biggest external pressure was, of course, when OCR was formed. We were not [saying], “Oh Government wants three awarding bodies, what do we do now?” We’d been working with them [RSA] for some time. So when...in ’97 there was this notion that there has to be three built on the GNVQ for us just then to say to RSA, “Well, we’d better sort of find some way of working together.” And we actually thought that it was going to be a joint venture. But the RSA...came along and said, “Well, don’t know about that. What about actually creating a single institution?” And the University of Cambridge of course has got only one answer to that: the University of Cambridge is the only owner when it comes to it. And the RSA itself [ie the ongoing Royal Society of Arts] were happy to accept that. They got a generous deal...out of it. [Although] it was a logical outcome, it [creating OCR] happened much faster than it would otherwise have done, I’m sure of that, because of the Government’s... Guaranteeing Standards.
(OCR2 2003)*

This rather rosy version was not altogether the way it appeared from the RSA perspective. Because Dearing had excluded NVQs from the one-stop shops, discussions about unification involved only GNVQs for RSA Examinations, a definite disappointment for that body, as an official explained:

*That...was very damaging in terms of the discussions, negotiations and relationships that went on because it shifted the power. Because after all, [if] you’ve got two organisations that are thinking about merging in some way or other, one of the factors that’s going to determine who dominates...is to do with power, it’s to do with money. What’s the volume of the turnover? Well the value of GNVQ...was trivial; whereas if you then said to an organisation like RSA, as it was, “But actually, no, we’re not talking about the £2 million from GNVQ but we’re talking about the £22 million from all of the qualifications...it would have significantly shifted the balance.
(OCR1 2000)*

It seemed that circumstances had again favoured Cambridge in the negotiations preceding the creation of OCR. In considering the whole series of takeovers or absorptions that Cambridge negotiated, it appears that they were in a sense endogenous and barely connected with the 1990s mergers culture – although the

pressure from *Guaranteeing Standards* admittedly speeded up what Cambridge was already planning.

In concluding his recollection of this period, the interviewee added a sort of postscript:

You may know that subsequent to that there was an attempt at what I call "The Grand Merger"...which was everything except Edexcel. Including City & Guilds. But it didn't come off. It was never going to come off because of course the University of Cambridge was never going to merge itself into anything.
(OCR2 2003)

This statement might serve as a warning to the body in New Zealand that has recently embarked with UCLES on creating a new university entrance selection test, to be considered in the concluding chapter.

AEB and NEAB: The North/South divide eventually bridged by AQA

The birth of the third unitary awarding body followed a longer gestation than the other two. It differed too in that it resulted entirely from governmental pressure. In the mid-1990s neither the Associated Examining Board (AEB) nor the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board (NEAB) was interested in altering what were established and successful organisations. However, following a strong nudge from the DfEE official in December 1996, referred to in the two interviews above, both Boards felt they had no choice but to seek a partner who could provide the GNVQs without which they could not continue to be accredited.

There has been subsequent speculation that they might have had other choices, which suggests that officials at QCA were unaware of the clear instruction from the

Department for Education and Employment. A QCA official expressed the view that the Boards did have other options:

[The creation of current unitary authorities was] sort of stimulated on the one hand by evolutionary pressures that arose from just review and reflection on the examining system and how well it was working, but on the other hand [by] political pressures, with ministers having views about what might constitute an appropriate number of awarding bodies. Then those two things coming together in a fairly mysterious way to lead to the creation of the unitary bodies. And that was interesting, because of course ministers have no power to tell the examining boards to do this. They put pressure on, they encouraged them, they said, "Patently, we think this is a good idea." I suppose there were implicit threats that something unpleasant might happen if the boards didn't want to go that way. But I'm not quite sure what they might have been, because had the boards stood their ground and said, "Actually, no, we'd rather do it this way, I guess they could have done that. And it's interesting to speculate what might have happened had they chosen to do that. (QCA2 2003)

However such a robust stance would have required the Boards to produce a coordinated joint response, and as Edexcel had already been created and OCR was taking shape, there was no chance of that option. Certainly both AEB and NEAB felt that if they were to survive as organisations, they had to work out some means of cooperation with City & Guilds, the only remaining GNVQ provider who could enable them to retain accreditation as providers of English qualifications.

The long-drawn-out series of meetings and negotiations between AEB and NEAB forms the central section of my September 2000 Masters Dissertation (Sturgis 2000) and will not be rehearsed again here. In summary, in autumn 1997 the two Boards formed a Joint Venture with City & Guilds entitled the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) Almost immediately City & Guilds withdrew. The other two then bought out City & Guilds' GNVQ provision, and following two years of negotiations, in April 2000 officially merged the two parent bodies in AQA. Instead of pursuing the detail of the entire process, I will focus on the observations of three different

interviewees that perhaps the most significant and lasting effect of the whole episode was the exit of City & Guilds from the AQA Joint Venture.

While the three unitary awarding bodies were subject to the ever-increasing regulatory prescription which was diminishing their professional freedom, City & Guilds acted so as to retain its liberty as an Institute established by Royal Charter and therefore beyond the reach of the threats to withdraw accreditation which were able to bring the AEB and NEAB to heel. This had been its stance throughout its history. As late as the 1986-87 annual report, the Director-General “*stressed City and Guilds’ own independence as the Institute’s greatest asset*”. Catherine Bush, in her case study of City and Guilds, described its position:

...It was established and operated in the self help and voluntaristic spirit of the [Victorian] age. The style of government was non- interventionist and liberal. C&G was a model of this approach. From its inception C&G’s activity displayed a dual nature; to provide service to current industrial needs and structures and although independent, to provide a mechanism for the implementation of government policy.
(Bush 1993: 10)

Bush identifies the tensions resulting from “*The initiative to develop NVQs and latterly GNVQs [which] has marked the intervention and involvement of Government in vocational qualifications which is unprecedented*” (Bush 1993: 5). It was the threat of further government intervention which City & Guilds foresaw if it were to relinquish its independent status to form a unitary awarding body that caused it to withdraw from AQA.

In the opinion of one observer, as the Dearing Report and then *Guaranteeing Standards* aimed to ensure parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications, “*the model very much looked to at that point was three vocational boards*” (AQA 203). If that was indeed the basis of the desired number of unitary

awarding bodies, one might assume that the policy anticipated that the three vocational bodies would remain within the structure. However, one of those bodies had a different agenda, in the opinion of an interviewee from another board. “*What was interesting was always the way City & Guilds kept themselves apart*” (OCR2 2003).

City & Guilds, at that time led by a wily Director General – and “*the cast of characters is very important*” (OCR2 2003) – held early discussions about cooperating with AEB. After all, the AEB had been an offspring of City & Guilds. However these talks came to an abrupt halt when it became clear that the City & Guilds’ objective was a straightforward takeover of the academic board. (Sturgis 2000: 40) Instead the discussions widened to become three-way negotiations including NEAB – with whom, it transpired, City & Guilds had also been exploring options. The resulting creation of AQA as a Joint Venture entered into by AEB, NEAB and City & Guilds was announced with much fanfare by the New Labour Junior Education Minister, Lady Blackstone, on 6 November 1997. Negotiations continued over the detail of the new structure, with the City & Guilds representatives becoming increasingly impatient with the slow pace of progress; they appeared to be advocating a full merger as soon as possible. Then in February 1998, they electrified the other two members of the Joint Venture: they offered to sell City & Guilds’ GCSE provision to AQA for £5 millions. This unusual method of leaving a legally created Joint Venture had the immediate effect of forcing AEB and NEAB to negotiate a more realistic price for the GNVQ provision they both needed to remain accredited awarding bodies. The two Boards eventually merged fully on 1 April 2000.

Although it is undeniably interesting to note the choice of language with which the City & Guilds negotiator's actions have been described by those involved, the more important factor is how the principal actors underlined the enduring impact of City & Guilds' withdrawal. A view from a member of another vocational awarding body was that City & Guilds' 'escape' was due to a lack of genuine government commitment to bridging the academic/vocational divide:

...Some of the bodies, and RSA was one, had a vision that nevertheless they wanted to enable a seamless web, if you like, of qualifications. Edexcel had already taken the plunge; RSA chose to do so, whereas City & Guilds took the opposite view. It simply sloughed off GNVQ and carried on. If they [government] had been serious about trying to alleviate the difference between academic and vocational qualifications, they wouldn't have set up a structure that allowed that to happen.
(OCR1 2000)

That individual was predisposed to take that view because of his disappointment that NVQs had not been included within the unitary awarding bodies' remit, as cited in an earlier excerpt from his interview.

Supporting that view of City & Guilds' action as having foiled the governmental objective was the cautiously phrased observation of a QCA official who obliquely seemed to suggest that City & Guilds had indeed foiled the regulator's intentions:

I presume that they broadly agreed with the philosophy that a degree of rationalisation, and certainly a greater degree of coherence between the general and the vocational was desirable. So they went along with it and, apart from all the sort of difficulties of deciding which partner to work with, there didn't seem to be any objection in principle to the idea of that degree of unification. The City & Guilds story is an interesting one, of course...and it continues, of course, in the context of.... [The sentence was unfinished.]
(QCA2 2003)

To another who had been involved in the negotiations, it seemed evident that:

...there was clearly an outside driver for those three parties to come together as AQA, and to ensure that they had some arrangement that would enable them to work together – that arrangement being the Joint Venture which finally emerged, but a Joint Venture from which City & Guilds um... actually 'wriggled out' I think is the only word you can use. He wriggled his way out of

it. Largely on the grounds that so much of its [City & Guilds'] activity fell outside regulation. And also because it was willing to hive off its GNVQs, and again, putting it bluntly, to sell them off. ...Had City & Guilds joined AQA in the way that...Cambridge joined with RSA and Edexcel was created out of the merger of BTEC and London, then you would have had a much more tidy situation than now.

(AQA2 2003)

This statement infers that had City & Guilds joined the AQA merger, the three awarding bodies would have been more powerful. Without the authority of the vocational awarding body which provided a huge volume of workplace qualifications, the unitary awarding bodies lacked the power to withstand the centripetal force exerted by QCA and the DfES. Unification may have brought about a reduction in the number of awarding bodies, but it has not brought about any discernible bridging of the academic/vocational gap – possibly because of the very large vocational fish that got away.

Unifying the products

A principal objective of the Dearing recommendations was to bring together vocational and academic qualifications under the roof of the same awarding body in order that the established reputation of the examining boards could confer higher status on vocational qualifications. A less publicised side-effect of this unification was the required reduction of syllabuses to be offered by the unitary awarding bodies. The limitations proposed on the number of syllabuses to be offered caused little comment outside the examining boards, perhaps because of concerns about comparability between subjects and between Boards. The justification for the reduction was based on Sir Ron Dearing's suggestion that:

The regulatory bodies, working in partnership with the awarding bodies, should reduce the number of syllabuses and options to levels where it is practical for them to be satisfied that equal standards prevail...while preserving a reasonable choice for centres.

(Dearing 1996: 88)

A year later, in the *Guaranteeing Standards* consultation document, this recommendation was strengthened and set out as a given rather than an issue for consultation:

Fundamental to any rationalisation of provision in academic examinations is a significant reduction in the number of syllabuses offered in particular qualifications. The Secretary of State has already strongly endorsed the recommendations in the Dearing review, and in the Standards over Time report, for reducing the number of GCE A level syllabuses, following a similar rationalisation already put in place for GCSE syllabuses. SCAA has now asked existing GCE A level boards to limit new syllabus proposals to a maximum of two in all large entry subjects.

(DfEE 1997a: 17)

While this requirement seemed on the surface to be a straightforward one, in fact it impacted very differently on the three awarding bodies because of the differences in their historic ‘market shares’. [See **Figure 4.3**] Clearly AEB and NEAB, later merged to form AQA, had much to lose from such a development.

Apart from the financial impact, a more fundamental result of this reduction in syllabuses was the significant reduction in the Boards’ individuality, built up over the years through designing syllabuses to cater for different students in different institutions. This had been their principal *raison d’être* since their creation. It certainly seemed counter to the market ethos which pervaded the decade. It also peeled away one more aspect of the Boards’ independence, and indicated that central control was the means by which that independence was being diminished.

Figure 4-3 Market Share by Board

A Level Percentage Market Shares by English Boards 1994-2000							
Date	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
AQA (AEB+NEAB)	51.10%	50.50%	49.20%	49.50%	48.80%	48%	48%
Edexcel	18.60%	18.80%	19.50%	19.40%	18.90%	19.20%	19.20%
OCR	23.40%	24.10%	25%	25.00%	26.40%	26.80%	26.80%
Total entries	732 974	730 415	740 470	777 710	790 035	787 734	772 005

(AQA 2000: 2)

3 Increasing Regulation: Accountability justifies control

I will summarise briefly the previous stages in the regulation of the examining system in order to emphasise the significance of the shift that took place during the 1990s. From their creation in the 19th century, the examining boards had been independent bodies accountable to their founding universities, until, to oversee the national system of School Certificates, the Secondary Schools Examinations Council was established in 1917 as an ‘arm’s length’ regulatory body.

When after the 1944 Act the Boards lost their places on the Secondary Schools Examinations Council and were replaced by civil servants from the Ministry of Education, it was clear to a later analyst that:

The distribution of power over the examination structure changed significantly in the post-war years. The Minister, Ellen Wilkinson, clearly wanted more control of examinations; George Tomlinson, her successor, continued this policy....

(Lawton 1984: 97))

Denis Lawton interpreted the Boards' removal from the SSEC in 1947 as a means of reducing the influence of the universities over the GCE, but quoted an earlier view which saw the change as clear evidence of a quest for increased central control:

Montgomery (1965) sees the constitution of the SSEC as a crucial factor in the distribution of power. The removal of representatives of the examining bodies from the SSEC was one important change; the increase in the Ministry's nominees from six to eight members in 1961 was another.
(Lawton 1984: 97)

After 20 years, early concerns about increased central control had subsided. Then when a widespread outcry about government interference greeted David Eccles' 1961 proposal for a Curriculum Study Group – designed to give the Minister access to the 'secret garden' of the curriculum rather than direct control over examinations – Edward Boyle responded to these concerns by establishing a very different regulatory body. The Schools Council exercised its regulatory responsibility in a very low-key manner, as recalled in the interview by a long-serving member of the regulatory structure, quoted more fully above:

Schools Council regulated, of course. Yes, it was done through A-level syllabus approval and scrutiny, wasn't it?
Yes, A-level scrutiny in Schools Council days was a voluntary activity. The boards saw it presumably as in their interest to have an external view of what they did.
It was never really contentious. We sent our reports to the boards alone – nothing public about them. And it was all done in a very...civilised way in that we sent these reports with recommendations and the boards were sort of trusted to get on with it.
(QCA2 2003)

A view from the Boards saw the regulatory control as broadly following in the same pattern over the years:

So there has always been the presence of regulation, as it were, in the schools examinations system...since 1917. And I think if you then advance it with the creation of O level and...A level, ...the same features are there of some degree of regulation of the system, with the government through the Ministry of Education and [then] the Department of Education actually laying down the features that the system should have, but leaving it very much to the boards as deliverers.

(AQA1 2000)

This last interviewee was quoted above as perceiving that the major shift to increasing central control came with the GCSE and its criteria requiring government approval. Replacing the Schools Council with the Secondary Examinations Council (SEC) and the School Curriculum Development Committee (SCDC) for another analyst was “a very centralist decision” particularly because “members of the two committees would be Secretary of State nominees not representatives of any of the organizations that had made up the Schools Council” (Lawton 1984: 10). From the standpoint of the regulator, too the advent of GCSE signalled tighter central regulation:

...SEC [1984] was a bit harder edged, and began to take an interest in 16 [16+ qualifications] of course, but that was because SEC was instrumental in putting GCSE on the road. ...I think, actually, that was quite a landmark because – do you remember, GCSE was approved by Keith Joseph on the condition that there were ground rules: general and specific criteria – those hotels around Russell Square.... So there was a regulatory instrument in the GCSE criteria....
(QCA2 2003)

When in 1988 the Secondary Examinations Council and the School Curriculum Development Committee were replaced by the Schools Examinations and Assessment Council (SEAC) and the National Curriculum Council (NCC), “SEAC was the first statutory body” which meant that the “process became elevated in status because of its statutory nature” (QCA2 2003). Although SEAC was indeed a statutory body and therefore of an entirely different level from the easy-going Schools Council, its control was still relatively minimal, but it bred a taste for ever-greater intervention by the regulator in the details of the examining process. Speaking in 2000, the Chief Executive of the regulatory body was very clear about this tendency to need ever more central control:

...from 1989 to 1993, SEAC had increased its control, its regulation. The first GCSE Code of Practice – I mean, that was a major step in regulatory control of awarding bodies. And this sort of thing snowballs in the sense that when you

have the concerns that lead to the controls, the controls identify further problems that lead to further tightening of controls.
(QCA1 2000)

I see this statement as key evidence of the effects of the ‘accountability agenda’ I identified at the end of the preceding chapter as the hidden driver of change resulting from the decay in trust. A similarly significant remark emerged in an interview with a DfEE official who, when asked to comment on the importance of comparability between Boards, perhaps inadvertently made a specific link between accountability and the tightening of regulation:

I would say comparability is a very important issue for us. And every year that there’s any suggestion in the press that things aren’t comparable causes us to intervene a great deal. Very important. (DfES 2000)

It followed therefore that each of the changes to the regulatory structure involved a shift of some degree of control from the Boards to the central body. The inherent conflict in the English structure was pinpointed by Kathryn Ecclestone in her 2003 analysis of the “*Principles, politics and practice*” of post-16 assessment and qualifications:

Awarding bodies...have vested commercial interests in maintaining their presence in the education and training system. For governments intent on standardising assessment systems in order to make them more transparent and accountable, diverse and independent awarding bodies are barriers to central regulation. (Ecclestone 2003: 74)

While I acknowledge the Boards’ vested interest in remaining as key players in the system, I contend that their assessment expertise has contributed to the checks and balances essential in retaining public confidence in such high-stakes qualifications. Oddly, while the Boards were of course aware of the increasing central control, its gradual encroachment on their independence did not arouse any overt resistance on their part. Their defence of their vested interest was minimal.

In 1986 the GCSE Groups did take the step of consolidating the Joint Council for the GCSE, initially created to ensure a common approach to the new examination, as a forum where they could meet to formulate a common response to central proposals. However they did not find the threat of central control to be sufficiently serious to overcome their habitual mutual suspicion and use the Council as a platform for resisting further centralisation. As centralisation accelerated during the 1990s there was still no resistance – a curious passivity, but a function perhaps both of long habit and the distraction of other changes they were undergoing.

In 1992, the Boards received an early warning of potential change when John Patten, as Secretary of State, having received a report criticising the Boards “*for allegedly allowing an erosion of standards in the GCSE examination*”, pointed out that “*although he did not control the boards, he had ‘quite serious powers’ that could be employed if he was not satisfied*” (Quoted in McCulloch 1994: 132). In October 1992, Patten reiterated his implied threat of the Government taking control. In his speech at the Conservative Party annual conference, he said: “*I have a message for those exam boards. Listen very carefully. I will say this only once. Get your act together*” (Quoted in McCulloch 1994: 133).

Patten was soon replaced, but in 1993 the merging of SEAC and NCC into the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) consolidated rather than increased regulatory control by clearly linking assessment to the curriculum – which of course was centrally designed. It was still the case that the regulatory focus was concentrated on examinations at 16. However SCAA was, together with NCVQ, its vocational opposite number, gradually widening its areas of interest. Clear evidence of the intensifying central control that was being brought to bear on the examining

boards comes from a 1997 DfEE summary of the powers gradually assumed by the regulatory bodies from 1993 in the interests of assuring standards:

SCAA and NCVQ, both individually, and through their Joint Committee, have done much to take this agenda forward through their work on quality assurance:

Codes of practice for GCSEs, GCE A levels and GNVQ.

Scrutinies of standards across all three qualifications.

GCE A level subject cores and GCSE criteria, specifying syllabus coverage and ground rules for assessment, and external assessors.

Common criteria for GNVQ centre approval and external verification.

Joint moderation sessions between awarding bodies for GNVQs.

'Pre-awarding' meetings between GCSE awarding bodies to reinforce the consistency of grading standards.

Common GNVQ tests, run jointly by the awarding bodies.

Common elements in GCSE examinations.

(DfEE 1997a: 21)

When following the Dearing Report, SCAA and NCVQ were brought together in 1996 to form the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), one interpretation from an examining board interviewee was that:

...the fundamental change...was the statutory regulation that came with QCA. And the fact that you've got statutory regulation means that you're backed up by a law which means they could step in, they could come and see our books for no...very strong reasons, really. I think that changed the relationship quite significantly.

(OCR2 2003)

This view that the principal effect of QCA's power having statutory status was to enable the agency to "see our books" seems extraordinarily naïve – and perhaps related to the fact that QCA did in fact carry out an audit of OCR in 2000 to investigate the source of that board's problems in 1999. [See **Figure 4.4**] In fact, on reflection this same individual did recognise that the statutory status of QCA's powers marked a major shift of control from the Boards to the regulator: "Now challenge you could do, until it became statutory. But once you've made them [regulatory powers] statutory, challenges become very difficult, because there's no appeal mechanism" (OCR2 2003).

Figure 4-4 QCA Audit of OCR: Causes of problems in 1999

- 1 Staff within the Operations and Assessment Divisions were not sufficiently trained to undertake some key roles. This deficit was at its most acute amongst OCR staff in Cambridge and Birmingham responsible for the relocation of scripts arriving from examiners. In particular, responsibilities were not sufficiently clear and the level of supervision was inadequate to identify where procedures were not being implemented.
- 2 Some examination centres did not send in entry data on time or did not follow instructions correctly. This produced delays in processing entry data which had a deleterious effect on subsequent examinations processes.
- 3 The centralised computer system provided by UCLES Corporate Services, the Examinations Processing System (EPS), was prone to errors, slow at peak times and generally difficult for staff to use. The EPS itself produced errors and delays in many parts of the examination process.

OCR has been required to develop an action plan with key milestones the first of which is in December 2000 to address the issues identified in this report which arise from the 2000 examinations. OCR must keep QCA apprised of progress on a regular basis. A QCA team will analyse the progress reports, carry out its own checks and intervene where necessary.

(QCA 2000: 21)

QCA's statutory powers, to outsiders a minor technical adjustment, naturally loomed very large in the Boards' view of their relationship with QCA. It meant that where the Boards disagreed with QCA over an issue, they had no option except resort to judicial review – a slow and high-level procedure. This rise in the regulator's status is evidence of another shift in the balance of power. It remained largely symbolic until real disagreements surfaced over the design of *Curriculum 2000*.

From the standpoint of a QCA official, while the significance of the change was played down, there was no ambiguity over what QCA expected by way of control:

Accreditation [to] the national qualifications framework...was conceived not so much as a regulatory instrument as a user aid, and part of Dearing's philosophy of trying to raise the status of the vocational by talking about a common framework.... But actually the framework was the basis for regulation, because you wouldn't accredit things into the framework without using some of the parameters of the framework as the basis of accreditation. I suppose you could say that's part of the regulatory system. And more formal monitoring, scrutiny and ultimately...public reporting of the outcomes of those scrutinies. We still do scrutiny reports with recommendations, but it's slightly euphemistic,

I suppose, the term 'recommendation', because there is an expectation that there will be a response to it. And there is now a formal requirement...that the boards produce an action plan leading to those recommendations, and we will take oversight of the delivery of that action plan. And in the last analysis, if the action wasn't taken to remedy any of the perceived deficiencies, there'd be the threat of de-accreditation. (QCA2 2003)

That seems a clear statement of where power over examinations now lies. Yet this significant increase in central control happened, as observed in a recent analysis, in the “*absence of any sustained intellectual justification for the theory and practice of regulation [which is] notable when one compares the open debates that took place prior to the establishment of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000*” (Blacklock 2003: 11). Blacklock also saw the establishment of QCA as part of a trend within the sphere of education:

Through the Department [DfES] the government has given a statutory remit to a number of non-departmental bodies (NDPBs) with responsibilities for regulating the provision and quality of education and training. These bodies lie outside the immediate sphere of government but not beyond its ultimate control and direction. (Blacklock 2003)

The question as to why the Boards offered no resistance to what seems the loss of any vestige of real control will be considered in the next chapter. At this point their failure to react will be attributed to their preoccupation with the external and internal pressures within a climate of challenges to their reliability which, I shall suggest, grew out of a confusion in English society regarding the basis on which grades were awarded. What might have remained the subject of academic discussions among experts on assessment had become a matter of public debate.

4 The Standards Debate: Are grades norm or criterion referenced?

This final external factor which I have identified as affecting the examining boards in the 1990s may seem a rather arcane one. As the debates around norm and criterion

referencing concern academic theories of assessment, it is an aspect of the modern educational *zeitgeist* that cannot be claimed to affect the examining boards uniquely. However I submit that a serious misunderstanding of the basis on which examination grades are awarded has disturbed in an important but unacknowledged manner the subsoil of the English social consensus around examination grades. The fallout from the debate in terms of the breakdown in confidence in the reliability of examination standards provided the justification for many of Dearing's recommendations and the whole of *Guaranteeing Standards*. This section will analyse how this has come about and suggest that the confusion in public understanding as to how the examining boards reach their decisions in awarding grades has been a definite factor in undermining their reputation for producing results that are comparable, valid and reliable. The doubt cast upon their performance has in turn facilitated the continuing centralisation of control over them. I have identified this doubt, and the resulting increased central control, as an effect of the underlying breakdown in social trust which is at the root of the quest for accountability. Therefore I contend that this issue is a fundamental one.

Any national qualifications system is deeply culturally embedded and dependent on the society's acceptance of it. When a series of technical developments in assessment practice had the unintended consequence of rupturing the English consensus over the basis of the qualifications system, the result was bound to be a destabilising factor. Yet the norm/criterion referencing issue is rarely highlighted in the regular debates concerning the drive to maintain standards over time and through qualification change. The crux of the issue is clear to academic analysts like Kathryn Ecclestone:

...reliability is still a central goal of quality assurance procedures used by awarding bodies and the QCA. More recently this goal has been in conflict with validity as a key feature of outcome-based systems [like]...NVQs and GNVQs.

In these qualifications, designers wanted policy-makers, awarding bodies, inspectors and end-users of qualifications such as employers and higher education institutions to accept a high premium on validity and place less emphasis on reliability, its supporters arguing that this shift would maximise the credibility of the qualifications.
(Ecclestone 2003: 41)

It would seem on current evidence that the aims of the designers have yet to be realised.

The matter finally surfaced publicly in October 2002 when Mike Tomlinson, in his Interim Report into the September 2002 AS/A2 grades crisis, commented on “*the longstanding misunderstanding of the difference between maintaining a standard and the proportion of candidates meeting that standard.... This misunderstanding appears to exist at almost all levels of the system, and in society at large*” (Tomlinson 2002a: Conclusions). He might have resorted to more technical language and referred to the confusion between norm and criterion referencing, as he did in his final report:

There is also strong support for the existing A level design principle that the achievement required for an A level should remain the same from year to year and reflect predetermined standards of attainment, irrespective of how many students achieve the necessary standards. This is often thought of as “criterion referencing”, although paragraphs 63 to 65 describe some of the difficulties of applying pure criterion referencing to A level examinations and assessment. I have encountered very little systematic support for a return to grading in which fixed quotas of grades would be awarded to students according to rank order rather than performance against a fixed standard of achievement (broadly, “norm referencing”).
(Tomlinson 2002b: 7)

In her work on GNVQs, Ecclestone suggests that “...it is a populist portrayal of norm-referenced reliability that now underpins comparisons in league tables of qualification results between schools, FE and sixth form colleges” (Ecclestone 2002: 69). She perceives a fundamental schism underlying the debate:

...different meanings of ‘standard’ reflect disagreement about values and goals in different qualifications and learning processes. This produces dissent and confusion over whether assessment should be a norm-referenced measure of consistent but selective achievement in order to promote reliable assessment

decisions or a criterion-referenced measure of attainment to produce valid, authentic decisions. Each interpretation offers a different meaning of what constitutes 'fair' assessment.
(Ecclestone 2002: 74)

A related but again rarely acknowledged factor that complicates the debate - not just in England - is inherent in the dual purpose the assessments are expected to fulfil. This dichotomy was highlighted by the distinguished trio whom QCA asked (well before the autumn grades crisis) to report on A-level standards in 2002:

The differences among the assessment purposes of selection (eg choosing the best students for university admission) and of certification (eg assigning high grades to those candidates who achieve the desired standard) have been the focus of persistent discussion in the literature on educational measurement.
(Baker, McGaw 2002: 8)

Any discussion premised on inherent misunderstandings would be problematic. However because the GCSE and A-level examinations are of such fundamental importance in their effect on the lives of English young people, the debate here is impassioned, with both sides vigorously proclaiming their view and neither side acknowledging the conflicted basis of that view. The public manifestation of the debate has been the annual glare of the media spotlight on examination results, with accusations of 'grade inflation' greeting consistently increasing attainment levels which are celebrated in other quarters. In order to show how changed public perceptions affected the Boards, it is necessary firstly to set out the issue that has significantly altered those perceptions about the basis on which grades are awarded. This misunderstanding has left the examining boards caught between the two sides yet unable to shed the necessary light on the debate.

The appeal of a truly fair assessment system

Because public examinations had evolved as selection devices "...*designed to identify the best rather than identify those who had achieved some defined level or*

performance” (Orr 1983: 15), their assessment had always been based on norm referencing. When GCE examinations replaced the School Certificates in 1952, they retained the traditional psychometric or norm referenced approach which was based on:

...the underlying notion...that intelligence was innate and fixed...[and] therefore could be measured and on the basis of the outcome the individuals could be assigned to streams, groups or schools which were appropriate to their intelligence (or ‘ability’ as it came to be seen).
(Gipps 1994: 5)

In 1960, the SSEC spelled out the norms for the Boards to observe in awarding GCE which were to guide the awarding process for the next twenty-five years. [See **Figure 4.5**]

“Critics of the psychometric paradigm found problematic the assumptions it involved of universality and unidimensionality” (Goldstein 1993). Therefore there was perhaps a predisposition to welcome ‘criterion referencing’, the assessment system Robert Glaser devised in America in 1963. In his ground-breaking paper he explained the basis of his system: “*What I shall call criterion-referenced measures depend upon an absolute standard of quality, while what I term norm-referenced measures depend upon a relative standard*” (Quoted in Gipps 1994: 79). Caroline Gipps identified his “seminal” work as “*signalling the emergence of educational assessment as a separate enterprise from psychometrics and psychological measurement*” whose key feature is that it is “*concerned with an individual’s growth rather than variation between individuals, and testing is linked to content matter taught*” (Gipps 1994: 79). The elimination of the need for subjective judgements, perhaps the most vexing element of norm-referenced qualifications, seemed a fairer system which “*appealed to policy makers and qualification designers*” (Wolf 1993: 6).

Figure 4-5 SSEC Norms for A-level Grades

APPENDIX A								
<u>Reconsideration of the A-Level Grading Scheme with Special Reference to Grade C</u>								
<p>The current general grading scheme for A level was agreed in 1960 by the Secondary School Examinations Council (SSEC) and came into effect in 1963. The scheme suggests that the percentage of candidates awarded each grade should be as shown in the following table.</p>								
Grade	A	B	C	D	E	O	F	Total
Percentage of entries	10	15	10	15	20	30		100
<p>Source: Ministry of Education, <i>The General Certificate of Education and Sixth Form Studies</i>, Third Report of the Secondary School Examinations Council (HMSO, 1960).</p>								
<p>These guidelines are the only published description of A-level grades to which both the GCE boards and users of A-level results refer.</p>								
<p>In proposing the scheme the SSEC made it clear that the percentage guidelines were to be regarded as no more than rough indications. In practice, however, the distribution of grades over all boards in each of the large-entry subjects has conformed closely to the guidelines, with only marginal fluctuations from one year to the next.</p>								

(JMB 1983)

An early indication of this appeal in England emerged with moves toward a single examination at 16-plus: “*A major feature of the proposed single system of examining at 16+ is the requirement for national criteria*” (Orr 1983: 7). The phrase introduced in 1980 by Mark Carlisle as Secretary of State for Education was the notion of ‘grade-related criteria’. Once again, as with the two previous instances of major examination reform in 1918 and 1944, the task of drafting the national criteria (which would ultimately be agreed and applied by the Secondary Examinations Council) was given...to the GCE and CSE boards jointly. A letter from the DES to all Boards (dated 28 February 1980) inviting them to undertake this task included the following suggestion in relation to grades:

‘Consideration should also be given to the possibility of incorporating (in the national criteria) some elements of criterion-referencing of grades, or some grades in the 7 point scale.

This might...go some way to free the award of grades from statistical norms, if quality or performance changes over time. (Quoted in Orr 1983: 7)

Ignoring the irony which hindsight might detect in the “*if*” in the final sentence, it is the case that the seed sown in that 1980 letter grew to produce a fundamental confusion that contributed in no small way to the crisis of 2002. This occurred despite the clear awareness of assessment experts like Desmond Nuttall, in 1983 a researcher at the Schools Council, that “*In practice, grading of public examinations relies on both norm-referenced and criteria-based considerations*” (Orr 1983: 13). Despite this expert insight, others had strong motives for endorsing the apparent desirability of a criterion-referenced system. Orr and Nuttall attributed the growing interest in criterion referencing to:

...the desire, mainly among politicians, to achieve greater comparability (a) between examining boards (b) between alternative syllabuses...in the same subject (c) between years and (d) between subjects. The pressure to maintain comparability in all these aspects arises principally from a desire to maximize fairness in the competition between individuals with different qualifications.

(Orr 1983: 19)

Other assessment experts were aware of these motives. Gipps and Stobart suggest that *“One of the reasons for the interest of the DES and Secondary Examinations Council (SEC) in the development of criterion-referencing within GCSE was concern over comparability, or rather the lack of it, in GCSE grades from different examination boards”* (Gipps and Stobart 1990: 77). However Gipps apparently decided against direct attribution for the move toward criterion referencing by taking refuge in the passive voice: *“...and then in the mid-1980s it was decided that both GCSE and National Curriculum assessment were to be criterion referenced* (Gipps 1994: 81).

Gipps’ grasp of the technicalities of assessment is unfortunately all too rare in English debates around the issues. Few outside a small circle of academic experts in assessment and examination board employees realise the implications for the English reliance on examination grades of Gipps’ observation that, *“Aggregating detailed assessments into a crude single grade compromises the information offered by the assessment”* (Gipps 1994: 85). She later states that *“...Sir Keith Joseph’s aim was to get 80-90 percent of 16-year-olds up to the level previously deemed to be average. On norm-referenced tests...by definition...this would be impossible”* (Gipps 1994: 89). Then, just as GCSE was being developed – but in the more peripheral area of vocational qualifications – a fully criterion-referenced qualification was created.

NVQs and Competence-based Assessment

The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) was established in 1986 with the daunting objective of turning the jungle of over 800 different vocational qualifications into a coherent structure. Naturally attracted by what seemed a clear

and fair assessment system, the NCVQ opted to create their new National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) as entirely criterion-referenced, with a lead body for each industry listing the required ‘competences’ for each of the five levels of award. Two leading theorists in the vanguard of the move to criterion referencing explained the advantages of the new model:

Indeed, in many norm-referenced systems of assessment – especially in education – the chief function of the assessment appears to centre on differentiation. In NVQ assessment, reliability is not an issue. ...Standards are valid if the evidence meets the performance criteria.
(Jessup and Burke 1990)

This “*seductive promise...of complete clarity*” offered by the criterion-referenced assessment of NVQs was neatly demolished by Wolf in her 1993 paper for the Further Education Unit (FEU). Through the use of clear examples, she demonstrated that “*while assessment systems may vary in the degree to which ...complex judgements come into play, such judgements are universal to all assessment*” (Wolf 1993: 6). In a later book, Professor Wolf chronicles the failure of all the bright hopes invested in NVQs (Wolf 2002b), but the NCVQ’s espousal of criterion referencing had strengthened existing interest in the use of this new and apparently fairer system within English educational circles.

The growth of a perception that examination assessment in England was abandoning norm referencing was enhanced in the spring of 1986 with the ‘cascaded’ training of all secondary school teachers for the new GCSE examination, teaching for which was to begin in September 1986. Lulled by the mantra that the assessment process for the new examination was designed to demonstrate what pupils ‘know, understand and can do, teachers underwent a fundamental shift in thinking about assessment. The notion of the ‘bell curve’ of results with all its faults gave way to a belief that henceforth a new and fairer system had been created.

Then, in a less widely publicised move, the guidelines which the Secondary Schools Examinations Council (SSEC) had drawn up back in 1962 [cited in **Figure 4.5**] setting out “*expectations for the proportion of candidates to be awarded each grade in large entry GCE A level subjects*” – ie the norms – were withdrawn.

A JMB initiative had been pressing for this change because of the extremely narrow marks range allocated to the grade C band [See **Figure 4.6**] with the resulting arbitrarily limited number of C grades awarded. Despite what seems this obvious distortion of an expected ‘bell curve’ of results, it took until 1987 (Paterson 2003: 143) for the Secondary Examinations Council to alter the guidelines [See **Figure 4.7**]. Now the professionals knew that strict norm referencing no longer ruled, although at the same time they were aware that the change would not be without difficulties. One professional examiner summed up the high expectations the new form of assessment had raised:

To implement criterion-referencing in large-scale examinations is problematical, as the efforts to date show. No doubt there has been a cargo cult mentality in evidence, believing that notions like grade-related criteria and grade descriptions would overnight eradicate the bad practice and inequities associated, sometimes unfairly and erroneously, with norm-referenced examinations.
(Wood 1991: 9)

Figure 4-6 Problem of Limited C Band

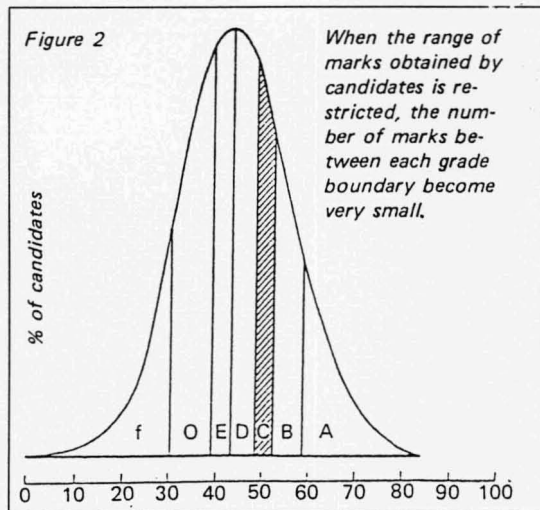
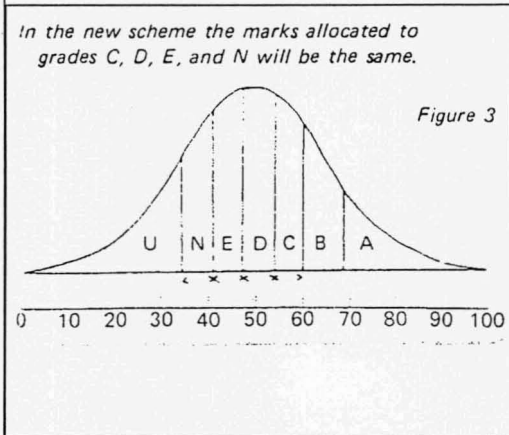


Figure 4-7 1986 Grade Bands



(SEC 1986: 2,3)

The effect of these high expectations has been the negative reactions to the steadily improving attainment levels in GCSE examinations.

This improvement has been generally welcomed as rising attainment by pupils, teachers, parents, examining boards and Ministers. Yet what have on the whole been louder voices have labelled the development as ‘grade inflation’ which implies a steady erosion of standards. The opening salvoes in the standards battle were fired in *The Times Educational Supplement (TES)* in late August of 1992. Two stalwarts of the ‘declining standards’ faction queried yet another rise in the results at both GCSE and A level. They were Dr John Marks, already known for his sceptical view of educational developments following his contribution to the *Black Papers* in the 1970s, and Dr Philip Evans, a “*former chief examiner with the London Board*” who never acknowledged the significance of that word “*former*” in his criticisms of a new type of examination. (TES 1992) Then John Patten, Conservative Education Minister added fuel to the fire by suggesting that the improved results were due to lax

examination standards, supporting his view by leaking a report on the GCSE prepared for him by HMI under confidential cover. HMI reported “*limited confidence that standards are being maintained...*” due to certain specified weaknesses. (HMI 1992) The Minister was sufficiently disturbed by the report’s findings to establish an inquiry on the basis of what had been revealed. His action provoked a media chorus which became an annual reaction to the examination results, as illustrated by the following headlines from the *Times Educational Supplement*:

Call for tighter checks on ‘rising’ grades as boards rally to defend A-level record

(*TES* 28 August 1992)

Marking is not lax, says examiner

GCSE row provokes terse statement from Government’s chief exams adviser

Griffiths angered by Patten’s inquiry

(*TES* 4 September 1992)

The disputes continued with variations on this theme throughout the 1990s:

Pass rises ‘are real’

The best-ever GCSE results have coincided with new research evidence that the exams are as difficult as ever

(*TES* 27 August 1993)

Experts row over pass rate levels

This is not the slippery slope, say exam boards

(TES 25 August 1995)

A-level pass rate rises yet again

(TES 16 August 1996)

This continuing rise in English students' attainment might be seen from an international perspective as overdue rather than a cause for concern. It was still the case by 2000 that more than half of English 16-year-olds were still failing to reach the standard which affords real choice as to their future direction. The data produced by Gillborn and Youdell in their graph [cited above in **Figure 4.1**] are summarised below to illustrate this under-achievement:

Percentages of students achieving 5 A-C grades at GCSE*

1997	-	45.1%
1998	-	46.3%
1999	-	47.9%
2000	-	49.2%

(Gillborn 2000)

In August 2001, a *Guardian* editorial addressed the issue of grade inflation – raised in that year by a former chief examiner regarding OCR's GCSE mathematics results. He attributed the two-grade drop in attainment he was claiming to “*competition between exam boards when schools are ready to opt for easier exams to improve their league positions.*” The paper's solution was that, if these allegations were upheld in the independent review it advocated, “*there is a simple remedy: end competition and have a single national exam board.*” Its notion of a review was equally direct: “*...requiring exam boards to release their pass marks over the last decade.*” Clearly the

complexities of modern examining have not been adequately explained to journalists, let alone to the public at large. The same newspaper on 15 August 2003, returned to the standards issue in another editorial, this time in relation to A levels. In this instance it took the opposing position. Confidently, if wrongly, stating that “*the A-level exam...changed course 20 years ago...when the exam was made ‘criterion referenced’ – all those who reached the required standard passed*”, it asked, “*Where is the proof of a fall in standards?*”

On 22 August 2002, Radio 4’s Today Programme opened with the news that “*The GCSE pass rate rose for the 14th year in succession*”: that is, ever since its first cohort in 1988. Yet it was not until October of that year that, as mentioned above, Mike Tomlinson attempted to diagnose the reasons for the continuing dispute over the significance of the rising pass rate.

An anecdote from my own experience illustrates his point about the fundamental misunderstanding that has bedevilled the debate in England. On 24 October 2002, I asked a class of year 12 boys if by a show of hands they would indicate how they believed the AS/A2 examinations, toward which they had just begun working, would be graded. Roughly one-third assumed criterion-referencing, one-third norm referencing and one-third hadn’t considered the matter. Although the technical terminology is rarely used, the confusion has taken deep root and fractured the English consensus about the meaning of grades.

The examining boards were inevitably tarnished by the corrosive effects of the annual standards debate and their judgements increasingly challenged by appeals over grades from students who felt they had not been awarded the grades they deserved. Perhaps

the boards have been guilty of keeping their methodology a professional secret. Yet my inquiry to an AQA official as to current practice elicited a clear response:

...the year-on-year statistical guidance is now our norm. We expect the statistics to be within 2% of last year's outcomes, but approvals are given to larger rises or falls if the qualitative evidence is convincing.
(AQA 2004)

Certainly, as the 21st century began, the Boards were increasingly being held to account. Ironically, by that time they had lost the power to act independently even if they had wanted to. However they were preoccupied by immediate concerns that threatened their capacity to deliver the results of the examinations they administered. The focus of the next section will narrow to consider some consequences of these internal pressures that were particularly affecting the Boards' operations.

Internal Stresses Preoccupy the Boards

From the external factors which affected to varying degrees all organisations, I turn now to the related but essentially internal factors the Boards had to deal with during the 1990s. These resulted indirectly from the external pressures and were therefore largely beyond the control of the examining boards. It will be suggested that the need to cope with these immediate problems occupied the management and trustees of the Boards at a time when they might otherwise have been able to mount some resistance to the increasing control to which they were subject.

While they were being buffeted by the various external pressures that the 1990s brought to bear on all educational institutions, the examining boards were of course – again like other parts of “*the education state*” – dealing with internal stresses that, I will suggest, absorbed a disproportionate amount of management attention. An

official at QCA suggested that this may have been because they had existed for so long as “*secure, bureaucratic organisations*” where staff “*would expect you could be there for life, because the function is a maintenance one more than anything else*” (QCA2 2003). Now as the 1990s ended they were having to adapt to increased competition, mergers with former competitors, and increasing central regulation. The individuals – whether staff or trustees – who were faced with these major changes were for the most part ill equipped for developing strategies to respond to the forces around them. With few exceptions, they came from what had been the sheltered world of education and had little experience of the cut and thrust of the marketplace. They were understandably preoccupied by the various internal problems because the nature of the examining business brooks no delays; problems must be solved immediately in order to meet inflexible deadlines. Whatever the reason, they failed to organise serious opposition to the increasing central control which they were experiencing. Their national forum, the Joint Council for General Qualifications, dealt with matters like standardising entry forms and agreeing the examination timetable; in no way did it fulfil the role of a lobbying body. They had never demonstrated the impulse towards group solidarity, so when circumstances required it they failed to join forces to preserve their independence. An official from one board identified this weakness:

[Finding a new role] *is not easy, as is demonstrated by the difficulties which the JCGQ has run into, where independent bodies find it very difficult to perceive the need to work collaboratively and cooperatively – particularly in this competitive arena....*
(AQA2 2003)

Instead they continued to look inward to deal with the undoubted problems they faced.

Indications of internal problems began to appear gradually following the various mergers after 1996. Well before the volcano erupted in September 2002, each of the

restructured organisations was showing – privately or publicly – unmistakable structural cracks. These incidents, although individually insignificant, must be considered in the light of the long history of the Boards’ previously successful operation. The atmosphere was charged by an early tremor from Scotland, where a newly merged Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) in summer 2000 produced either late results or none at all for 17 000 students sitting the reformed Scottish Higher examinations. In September 2000 the Scottish Executive commissioned Deloitte & Touche to investigate the problems at SQA. The resulting report concluded that, together with some general weaknesses in management, the organisational structure had been:

...neither effective nor efficient in the new circumstances, and proved insufficiently robust when faced with the challenging logistics of new qualifications and a major IT systems implementation.
(Deloitte&Touche 2000)

Resignations of both the Chief Executive and Chair of SQA were necessary to quell that particular storm. Despite the Deloitte Touche report’s highlighting of weaknesses in the compatibility of the computer systems following the merger of the academic and vocational assessment bodies, there was no indication that QCA foresaw similar problems resulting from similar mergers in England. Yet the size of the two Scottish agencies and the numbers of candidates involved in Scotland were dwarfed by their counterparts in England. Nevertheless, it seemed only the awarding bodies who viewed the Scottish crisis with any misgivings about a similar event south of the border.¹⁰

As the unitary awarding bodies took shape, opinions were also forming about these new constellations. Anecdotal evidence was rife. OCR was acquiring a reputation with teachers and examinations officers for serious gaps in communication between

its Oxford-based A-level syllabuses and its Cambridge computer systems: candidate entries were unreliable, examination materials late in arriving and results frequently full of errors. The new organisation had failed to produce common stationery and compatible computer systems. Continuing complaints led QCA to investigate the problems at OCR. In December 2000 it produced a report that confirmed that there had been problems in 1999 and listed ‘action points’ following monitoring of the process in summer 2000 [See **Figure 4.4** above]

Despite OCR’s weaknesses, it was Edexcel which achieved the dubious distinction of becoming media shorthand for incompetence, disorganisation and unreliability. This resulted from a series of highly publicised errors. In March 2001, 10 000 students received incorrect results for Key Skills tests, and were offered re-sits – an admission that the results were irretrievably flawed. In June, a mathematics paper was somehow stolen and offered for sale prior to the examination. Despite the forced resignation of its Chief Executive in September 2001, Edexcel in January 2002 produced an AS-level mathematics examination paper containing an error which was obvious to candidates. These lapses seriously undermined not only that organisation’s reputation but wider confidence in the whole system when presented by the press as in Rebecca Smithers’ article of 29 January 2002 in *Education Guardian* (See **Figure 4.8**)

An Edexcel official later attributed such problems to “the enormous logistic pressure within the awarding bodies” resulting from *Curriculum 2000*:

It meant, I think, far too much work for staff with no increase in resources.... One of the consequences were [sic] poorly proof-read papers at the end of the day.... We ended up with an exam paper that came from one series of changes and an answer book which reproduced some of the questions from another set. And that was the famous ‘AS maths disaster’ Whilst the effect on the students at the end of the day was virtually nil, the political damage to the system and the loss of public confidence was bad.
(Edexcel2 2003)

While Edexcel had been suffering in the media and OCR was attracting teachers' complaints, AQA had survived relatively unscathed – at least publicly – until summer 2002, when for the first time it did not get all results to centres by the agreed date. Were these problems the result of inefficiency, incompetence or mismanagement? To discover possible answers, some of the internal pressures affecting AQA will be considered. AQA is the focus principally because of my longstanding connection with that board and previously with the AEB, one of its constituent parts. As a result I have had an unusual degree of access to matters that are normally confidential. I have, of course, asked for and received permission to use the material I have cited.

Figure 4-8 Smithers' list of Board lapses

Exam boards: a catalogue of failures

Feb 2000 OCR blames a shortage of markers for delays in appeals against last summer's grades.

April 2000 The first league table of exam boards are published; Edexcel and OCR are warned they must "substantially improve the service".

Aug 2000 The Scottish Highers fiasco: 17,000 results late or missing. Ron Tuck, chief executive of exam board SQA, resigns.

Nov 2000 Chair and board of Scotland's education authority resign.

March 2001 Edexcel offers resits to 10,000 students given the wrong marks for a key skills exams [*sic*].

June 2001 Edexcel pure maths A-level paper is leaked and offered for sale. An AQA physics A-level paper contains an impossible question.

August 2001 Delays in sending out A-level results is [*sic*] blamed on pressure of new AS exams.

October 2001 Christina Townsend resigns as chief executive of Edexcel after complaints, citing a "particularly demanding year".

Jan 2002 An Edexcel A-level maths question is found to be impossible and pages are missing from an IT exam paper; the government sends a "hitman" into the troubled board.

An additional factor that magnified the usual merger difficulties any organisation faces was that the formation of AQA involved the extra complexity of the intangible but nonetheless real ‘north/south divide’ as embodied in the two very different but equally distinctive organisational cultures of the Northern Examining and Assessment Board with offices in Manchester, Harrogate and Newcastle and the Associated Examining Board located in Guildford and Bristol. This had the effect of exacerbating – and for my purposes highlighting – the internal pressures that all three new unitary assessment bodies faced.

The first internal problem I shall examine was one involving what is known in commercial parlance as ‘human resources’. As the only significant resource of an examining board is the quality of its staff, personnel problems of any sort are a serious matter. During the 1990s such problems occurred for AQA at two levels. One was the disruption to permanent staff resulting from mergers at the same time as they were adapting to changes in the qualifications they administered. The second was the gradual reduction in the number of teachers willing to participate in the marking process. The effect of these two problems was to affect the delivery of examination results and add to questions over the Boards’ reliability.

The second issue was one experienced by virtually every organisation during the 1990s: the escalating demands for ever-more-complex technology. Mergers inevitably complicated technological issues further because of the need to ensure that newly merged and usually very different systems were compatible. From the perspective of a regulator, this was very often the source of difficulties, particularly when mergers were involved:

I suspect that one of the key areas of difficulty there has been computer systems, you know more than people, where you're trying to bring together incompatible things and somebody else is offering to make it all whiz-bang. I mean, I think several of the bigger and more spectacular problems have been computer generated – for Scotland as well, where there were similar very tense mergers between vocational and academic.

(QCA3 2004)

The third internal pressure was a function of all the others: the cumulative effect of externally-induced changes and internal personnel and technological pressures was an inexorable rise in costs. The financial pressures on the three awarding bodies differed in their severity and in how they were handled, but were certainly felt by all three. In any market, the 'bottom line' is a vital indicator; for the Boards their eventual acceptance of government subsidy was confirmation of their loss of independence. Of the three factors, for AQA it was the personnel issue that was first to make itself felt.

1 Staff Problems Resulting from Change

The principal personnel issue was the destabilising effect of major change within two long-established organisations as AEB and NEAB embarked on their Joint Venture, the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance in Autumn 1998. Although the actual change took place at the end of the 1990s, uncertainty about the future had been hanging over staff since the publication of the Dearing Report in 1996 with its recommendation that awarding bodies should seek "*mergers, associations and partnerships across the binary line*" (Dearing 1996: 29). Once again, I recognise that such uncertainty was not a problem for the examining boards alone; it was a feature for many organisations facing mergers and takeovers during the 1990s. However in this instance I submit that the change was imposed rather than chosen by the organisations concerned. Then the negative effects of change had a direct impact on

the ability of the organisation to fulfil its central role in providing reliable and valid results for English students.

As indicated above, much has been written about the impact of change on any organisation. The risks were well known to the first Director General of AQA. She was a veteran of the 1987 merging of five CSE boards to form the Northern Examining Association (NEA) for the GCSE followed in 1992 by the merger of NEA with the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) to form the Northern Examination and Assessment Board (NEAB). These experiences had taught her that mergers were never a simple process. Despite her evident concern to ease the process for staff, tensions developed. The instability resulting from these tensions had real consequences for an organisation whose only real asset is the skill of its staff.

From the emergence of AQA as a Joint Venture in November 1998, staff were uncertain about their future and many were convinced that there was a north/south power struggle involved under the surface. When after 16 months AEB and NEAB, having bought out City & Guilds' GCSE provision to ensure their survival, agreed to merge into a single organisation, any relief at this resolution was tempered by the need to create a new staffing structure for the new organisation. Experienced and long-serving staff were faced with deciding whether to apply for posts within the new staffing structure, for which they had to undergo competitive interviews, often involving employees from an organisation which they had always seen as a competitor. While the new structure was taking shape, people had to learn to adapt to new procedures. The two organisations had developed different approaches to virtually every aspect of the examinations process. While it was readily agreed that the principle of 'best practice' would guide the new organisation, in reality staff found

that this could mean altering deeply ingrained habits. Yet there could be no allowances made for all this when it came to producing examination papers, processing entries, recording marks and turning out results on time. Even when the new staffing structure had finally been put in place by the spring of 2002, there were still considerable difficulties in forging a single approach. As mentioned above, serious delays occurred in producing results in August 2002 which a subsequent investigation attributed to staff failure to adapt to new uniform practices. It took another year for these to become properly embedded. The then Director General observed in a message to me in August 2003, following the end of my term as a trustee, *“You will be glad to know that so far everything has gone really well this year – much better than 2002, a clear indication that merger had a real effect last year”* (Tattersall 2003).

A staffing matter related to the merger dashed AQA trustees’ expectations that eliminating the duplication inherent in two separate Boards would reduce costs. In creating the staffing structure for the new organisation, the directors had analysed the staffing requirements of the five divisions of AQA and found that if they were to be able to guarantee the required level of performance as qualifications changed and demands for data increased, they had to increase staffing levels. This outcome – what was clearly an internal issue resulting from external pressures – meant financial reserves had to be tapped more deeply than anticipated. The financial effect on the new organisation will be considered below.

Adapting to a new qualification structure

Not only did staff have to adapt to changes in practice in a new organisation. Simultaneously they had to take on a completely new style of qualification and

radically change one that had been a constant lodestar since 1951. The post-Dearing decision that GNVQs should be provided by the same bodies that awarded academic qualifications was addressed initially by AQA's purchase of City & Guilds' GNVQ provision. The cost of this transaction [£1 million] had not been anticipated because City & Guilds had been a member of AQA's initial joint venture until the threat of government interference caused its strategic withdrawal.

To ensure a smooth transition, because the qualification was, of course, in active use in post-16 institutions around the country, a core unit of City & Guilds staff continued to administer the GNVQs for client schools and colleges while designated AQA staff learned the procedures for the new acquisition. Such a hybrid arrangement proved problematic and led to errors for which lines of responsibility were not clear. Even when this dual control ended, the continual adaptations that QCA was suggesting for GNVQ qualifications meant a drain on staff and consequently on costs. Then AQA found that its acquisition of City & Guilds' market share - less than a quarter of GNVQs across the country - did not provide the economies of scale that are essential to ensure that administering a qualification is cost effective. This was another instance of significantly increased costs resulting from an externally-generated requirement.

However, the GNVQ factor was a minor issue compared with the complete restructuring of A levels with the *Curriculum 2000* reforms. While the wider effects of this change to post-16 qualifications will be considered in the next chapter, here the focus is on its effects on staff in the examining boards. The re-design of A levels involved separating the qualification into a two-level structure. Advanced Supplementary (AS) comprised three modules in each of four subjects as the norm for year 12, and what was known as A2 meant that most students took three modules in

three subjects in year 13. For Board staff this meant a complete change in the rhythm of their working year. There would no longer be a quiet season in the examining world.

Following immediately on the ever-increasing appeals in September and October, staff had to begin preparing for three sets of modular examinations in year 12, with a 33% increase in entries because virtually every student was now taking four subjects as the norm rather than three. This change in itself would have required considerable adjustment, but the new pattern had to accommodate the continuing administration of what were termed ‘legacy syllabuses’: the second year of the 1999-2000 A-level cycle plus retakes and various other leftovers. The effect was that staff were now handling 15 examination series in a year, each of which involved “*detailed checking, handling, aggregating and linking to entries within two IT systems*” (AQA 2003a). For AQA alone, examination entries increased between 2000 and 2002 by 14.5%. This meant processing 13 788 518 modules in the first year of the new staffing structure. Such significant increases should have been good news for the newly merged organisation. Unfortunately the increased administration generated by the move to modular examinations required a 17.5% increase in processing staff at a cost which had not been anticipated in the budget (AQA 2003a).

Adapting to the declining supply of markers

Another personnel-related issue also contributed to staff stress (and spiralling costs) for all three assessment bodies. This was the growing shortage of teachers willing to take on the task of examination marking. Problems in recruiting markers had been

building gradually during the 1990s, but peaked at the end of the decade just as demand for their services burgeoned. Since 1988 when the National Curriculum had introduced Standard Assessment Tests at ages 7, 11 and 14, English pupils had become the world's most externally tested school population. Yet it seemed that little thought had been given to the source of skilled individuals needed to do the marking of these assessments.

At one time it had been the case that teachers would volunteer to mark O-level or A-level papers in order to combine increasing their professional expertise with an opportunity to supplement a low level of income. Two apparently unrelated developments had undermined this practice. Firstly, the Boards were supplying ever more transparent data on students' performance. One no longer had to take on the burden of marking in the evenings and at weekends in order to hone one's pedagogy to ensure a better performance by one's classes. Secondly, with an ever-increasing workload and an improving salary structure, teachers' motivation to take on extra time commitments for a limited financial return was diminishing. Then *Curriculum 2000* changed the A-level assessment pattern from what had been largely terminal examinations to AS and A2 modules examined at three points in each year. It was left to the Boards to cope with this diminishing supply of markers while the number of assessments was suddenly increased by policy decisions beyond their control.

Neither the DfEE/DfES nor QCA - which as the system's regulator might have been expected to take an interest in the issue - showed awareness of the problem until the autumn of 2001, when QCA's October Conference, oddly located at the Aston Villa football ground in Birmingham, focused on the potential crisis in marker supply. The departure of the DfEE delegation from this conference immediately after the keynote

speeches and before the small group discussions with practitioners seemed indicative of the curious lack of any feeling of responsibility by the Department. One wondered whether Estelle Morris as Secretary of State for Education would have felt her civil servants were serving her well by this failure to listen to practitioners who had been invited at government expense to offer their experience of the realities of examination marking. Certainly representatives of the examining boards and QCA took careful note of what was said. However, none of the evidence of existing pressures had any immediate effect. It took the crisis of September 2002 and the simultaneous arrival of a new Chief Executive at QCA to do that.

Faced with the huge increase in the demand for markers, AQA established a unit of its workforce dedicated to the recruitment of examiners and managed – just – to ensure that all papers were marked by the August 2001 deadline. This, of course, meant diverting the staff from other work and resulted in yet further costs to the organisation. However, the staffing problems did not end when the papers had been marked.

During the 1990s, the substantial increase in appeals over the grades awarded had been a corollary of the increasing importance in those grades as ‘gatekeepers’ of young people’s future progress. What had once been a minor feature of the post-results period was becoming a major activity for the Boards, absorbing staff time and once again adding to costs. Then because the new AS/A2 awards of Curriculum 2000 had not earned any public confidence, the trickle of appeals became a flood. In summer 2001, AQA had handled 29,757 Enquiries about Results; in 2002 the number was 44,034 – a 48% increase (AQA 2003a). This enormous increase again was an unbudgeted cost factor which meant yet more funds had to be found by senior staff

and agreed by trustees. All of these changes – in candidate entries, in modular results and in appeals over those results – had to be produced by computer systems which, though inanimate, were also showing signs of strain.

2 Upgrading Information Systems and Tracking the Data Explosion

Throughout the 1990s, all organisations were working against a background of rapidly developing computer technology. For the examining boards, this meant the usual need to replace typewriters with desktop computers, to ensure that electronic communication reinforced telephone services – which teachers and examinations officers now expected to be available whenever they wished to ask a question (causing a near-revolt of switchboard staff in Manchester). AQA faced continual problems in finding and financing the scarce and costly expertise needed to build confidential data bases for the recording of results. Early experience with consultants who failed to meet deadlines (which are not flexible in the world of examining) demonstrated that the very specific needs of the examinations sector were best met by ensuring a controlling role for AQA staff. Yet there was no spare capacity in the staffing structure. If someone from the Information Technology and Communications Division were to take on a particular development project, that individual's work had to be covered by finding a suitably qualified person in a very competitive employment market at a time when widespread fear of a 'millennium bug' was raising the costs of computer expertise ever higher. In order to address this problem, the AQA trustees had to make an exception in the new organisation's salary structure to provide additional increments for the Information Technology division. This added another

element to the very considerable costs of the necessary hardware and was, naturally, a source of friction among other staff.

Whenever ‘blue skies thinkers’ considered the interface of the increasing volume of papers to be marked and the diminishing supply of markers, a frequent solution proposed was that the burden could be eased through the use of technology – usually citing developments in North America or the Antipodes. This solution took no account of the completely different terrain that qualifications occupy in England. Firstly, there is no national qualification in the USA, Canada, or Australia, where education is a state or provincial responsibility. As a consequence, any comparisons with developments in New South Wales or Minnesota are on the basis of widely differing numbers, purposes and cultural significance.

Secondly, because GCSEs and AS/A2 qualifications are uniquely ‘high stakes’ or ‘gatekeeping’ examinations, the requirements for reliability and validity are much more rigorous. Thirdly, despite enthusiasts proclaiming the advantages of electronic testing, there is a strong English suspicion that what is often referred to as ‘tick box assessment’ is inferior to the individual’s written answer to a question. Therefore, although electronic testing is becoming increasingly sensitive, the Boards were all aware that investment in more than a modicum of this technology could well prove counter-productive if the users of examination results did not value the outcomes. They were also becoming aware that there was a growing predatory interest in the English examining scene from large-scale commercial organisations which specialise in online testing. The attraction is undoubtedly the size of the English examinations market: 26 million scripts and pieces of coursework in 2004. (Smithers 2004a) It was the vocational field which experienced the first fully commercial newcomer.

The interested party was the American test-processing company NCS, which approached firstly OCR. Intervention from UCLES, never inclined to what it sensed would be a subordinate role, halted embryonic cooperative plans and led to the resignation of OCR's then Chief Executive. Next NCS turned to AQA, where trustees' suspicions of a takeover in disguise led to the termination of a potential joint project. Finally, in the autumn of 2002, Pearson, the multinational organisation which describes itself as "*the world's leading education company*" (Edexcel 2003) – which by then had acquired NCS as its assessment arm – found the *entrée* it had been seeking in a financially straitened Edexcel. As a result of what an Edexcel official described as "*one of the major downsides [to Curriculum 2000] – the financial cost...to awarding bodies*" (Edexcel2 2003), Edexcel had posted a £7 million deficit in 2002 (Edexcel2 2003). By spring 2003, Edexcel had placed the following announcement on its website:

Pearson and Edexcel Create New Organisation to Modernise

Exam Marking and Processing

The new organisation, London Qualifications, was created with Edexcel owning 25% and Pearson 75% of the equity. The website proclaimed that Pearson "*plans a multi-million investment programme over the next five years through London Qualifications to introduce a technology-based approach to marking and processing examinations.*"

In a recent interview with the CEO and President of Pearson Assessment & Testing at the impressive new Edexcel office in High Holborn, I learned that Pearson now wholly owns Edexcel and is pressing ahead with its plans to introduce technology in its quest to "*close the loop*" through providing assessments together with the support through its textbook arm for identified weaknesses. (Edexcel4 2005)

This acquisition of an examining board by a listed company was cited in September 2002 by a bitter Sir William Stubbs as evidence of Education Secretary Estelle Morris's "*amazing inability to turn educational ideas into policies.*" He claimed he had written to her about "*what would be a significant change to the system*", but received no reply. Then Junior Minister David Miliband later told him, "*We believe in a market policy; just let things go and see how it works*" (*Sunday Mirror* 29 September 2002: 1). Stubbs' warnings had certainly fallen on deaf ears, as the takeover went through without questions being raised – except within the other awarding bodies, who regarded with considerable suspicion this arrival of a listed international company into their previously closed world of 'not for profit' bodies with charitable status.

A less publicised takeover followed in November 2002 when the examinations division of the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry was acquired by GOAL plc with plans to "*exploit the Company's expertise [in the provision of vocational qualifications] and extend its business into the UK post 16 education market and overseas*" (GOALplc 2001)

While aware of all this distracting activity, the awarding bodies' primary objective was to ensure that their systems were able to cope with the ever-increasing demands made upon them. Following mergers, they had to harmonise different systems. OCR's problems in that respect were alluded to above. At the same time, the code of practice drawn up by QCA required that their systems allocate a unique lifetime numerical identifier for every candidate rather than simply allocate their own numbers to candidates as entry forms were received. The advent of the modular AS/A2 meant reporting results on a rolling schedule rather than an end-of-course basis. New

employment regulations required a major upgrade in the personnel records kept on their seasonally employed temporary staff – the thousands of markers and university student checkers taken on for basic clerical tasks.

To address all these pressures, AQA planned ‘IT Project AQA15’, which was to design software capable of handling all the entries, module and overall results, plus personnel data for both permanent and temporary staff. The Director of the Information and Communications Technology Division estimated in January 2003 that: “...*project AQA15 will place even greater burdens on the team [likely to be working on 10 to 11 other emerging projects], requiring 30 to 40 [external] contractors at peak times.*” In making a case for increased staffing in his Division, he pointed out that staff were:

...currently managing both the technical infra-structure for the AEB and NEAB legacy systems and the technical infra-structure for the new AQA systems. By 2005/06 AQA might expect to see some diminution in this workload as the legacy syllabuses are de-commissioned. In the short term it faces the dual problem of managing the old and new in tandem and also supporting the development and implementation of the new technical architecture (including the management of the transitional problems).
(AQA 2003a)

These pressing needs in terms of personnel and technology, of course, translated into spiralling costs for AQA. Yet the Board was powerless either to control many of the costs or to increase its income substantially: a position of undeniable stress for any organisation. Perhaps the financial situation illustrates most clearly that the Boards were no longer in control as independent organisations.

3 Not Calling the Tune, but Paying the Piper: The internal financial pressures resulting from externally-generated change

It is difficult to credit in view of the dominant role of the English examining boards within the financially hard-pressed English education system, but *“their finances are shrouded in secrecy. They are non-profit making organisations: limited companies which also have charitable status”* (Smithers 2002). Somehow the confidentiality which they had acquired as professional examining bodies had covered their entire operation. Never from their origins in 1903 (JMB) and 1953 (AEB) until the summer of 2001 had any government agency investigated either board’s finances. As charitable bodies, they filed accounts annually with the Charities Commission, but apart from confirming probity, such accounts reveal very little.

Then in 2001 QCA carried out an audit of the board’s general qualifications operation. AQA’s Council, while confident that despite the ongoing restructuring exercise the administration would stand up to such scrutiny, assumed that this was a signal that government attention was beginning to look very carefully at the organisation’s finances. The Boards’ curious status as non-profit-making bodies with charitable status whose business was virtually entirely within the public sector meant they received no state subsidy even for the costs of government-instigated development. Over the years they had always tried to retain a prudent level of reserves, a practice virtually unknown within the education sector and one that QCA might well query. However the report in February 2002, while it commended the *“committed senior management team supported by equally committed staff”* (QCA 2002a), no reference was made to the Board’s finances.

Yet at the same time, the rising costs of examinations to schools were a growing source of complaint. The Secondary Heads Association claimed that “the *exam bill of an average secondary school of 1200 students had doubled* [as a result of Curriculum 2000] *to around £100 000 in the past three years*” (Smithers 2002).

Despite such complaints from those who had to pay examination fees, the Boards had never been profligate. Throughout their existence, the presence as Trustees of a number of practising educationists, who kept a weather eye on the budgetary constraints within which the sector functioned, had ensured a prudent financial regime. A clear example of such prudence was the decision of AQA’s Trustees in July 2000 to hold the fees for the new *Curriculum 2000* AS level examinations at £15 rather than increase the rate to cover the very considerable development costs. The likely consequences to AQA’s balance sheet were predicted in clear terms by the Director of Resources. However, practising professionals among the Trustees pointed out that the post-16 sector was facing the costs of the entire year 12 cohort sitting three AS modules in four subjects without receiving additional government funding. It seemed only fair that the costs of the new scheme be shared by the Board rather than borne only by the institutions it served. In terms of the market, which had always to be borne in mind, this was not an appropriate time to alienate ‘clients’ by raising the price of qualifications.

As predicted, by summer 2002 AQA was facing a serious deficit. Because this is illegal under the rules of the Charities Commission, the Trustees agreed to a rise in fees for the following year. Rather than asking for full financial information to justify the fees, QCA officials resorted to reminders that fee-capping was a power the minister now held. (AQA 2002) This unwillingness to analyse the true costs of the

examining system is – to any outside observer – at the very least curious, and possibly negligent behaviour by a regulator or a government department. Yet it is another established feature of the English examining system.

No financial forecasts had adequately predicted AQA's sharply escalating costs. The merger had been expected to reduce costs but instead staffing levels increased; the doubling of appeals over results had not been anticipated; IT developments required ever-increasing investment. Inroads were made into reserves to cover the capital costs of new hardware and software and to fund the increased staffing costs resulting from the merger. Eventually that source was exhausted and in January of 2003 AQA's management had to request from its governing Council a supplement to the budget of a total of £760 103 as a result of a combination of budgetary pressures summarised as follows:

AQA has faced a number of extraordinary financial pressures since its creation in 2000. Firstly, it had to develop new syllabus specifications, designed and assessed by QCA without regard to development costs, for all of its mainstream services [A-level subjects]. This has also included the delivery of huge volumes of printed materials to support the new specifications and deliver substantial in service training programmes to support the teaching community. Secondly, to create the infra-structure and ICT systems needed to deliver the new services. These factors have generated both one-off development costs which have still not completely run through the system [sic]. They have also generated some ongoing costs as AQA's examinations have moved predominantly from a linear style of operation to a modular style. Thirdly, it has incurred one-off costs created by the merger. Finally, it has been obliged to address a number of fundamental issues outside the scope of its control. For example:

National shortage of examiners.

Impact of multi-regulation on AQA's affairs.

Increases in national insurance contributions.

Increases in pension contributions coupled with the full impact of the loss of tax exemptions to superannuation schemes.

Shortage of accommodation.

Plunging equity markets.

Increased litigation from former employees and fee-earning personnel.

(AQA 2003a)

From a surplus at 30 September 2000 of £3.71 millions, the board's position had moved to a deficit of £17.64 millions as at 30 September 2003. This led ultimately to the closure of offices in Newcastle and Bristol, with resulting redundancies.

Similar financial pressures on the London board had led to the takeover by Pearson described above, while OCR – as always able to rely on the financial strength of UCLES – shows signs of withdrawing somewhat from the heavily regulated arena. An OCR official hinted at considerable dissatisfaction when he suggested that the regulatory body comprised “*mostly the staff who'd been [there] and therefore were finding it very hard to understand what regulation was about. In fact [they] never applied regulation; they actually applied government direction.*” This may explain his saying that “*now perhaps a little bit more than ever we're back fully in the fold of the university and I think that colours the views and outlook of the organisation*” (OCR2 2003).

The Boards Destabilised: The wrong time for major change

By the end of the final decade of the 20th century, the combined effects of these external and internal pressures left the three unitary awarding bodies under severe stress. Their professional autonomy had been significantly breached by increased regulatory control, their organisational stability challenged by mergers, their financial position weakened by unbudgeted costs. A necessary preoccupation with coping with these various issues may have masked a full realisation of the extent of their loss of control. It was at this low ebb in their history that they faced the greatest change to A levels since they were created. At a point when their professional judgement was most

sorely needed, the balance of power had altered to leave them in the position not of the regulator's active partners but rather of passive clients. The result was a flawed assessment structure for the revised A levels which led to the grades crisis of September 2002. The debate surrounding the awarding of the first grades of *Curriculum 2000* will be presented as clear evidence that the Boards were no longer in control of their central function.

Looking beneath the 1990s agenda: What was really happening

Again, before moving to consider the crisis which I suggest grew inexorably out of the instability of the Boards brought about by the pressures of the 1990s, it is important to return to my research questions and to reflect on the underlying significance of the analysis I have presented.

This chapter has, I believe, has gone much of the way to answering the second and third questions:

2 How did the successive changes to the examinations structure affect their role?

3 What evidence is there of a shift in control from the Boards to the State?

I believe I have demonstrated that the change to a single 16+ examination began the process of reducing their professional independence over the technical aspects of that qualification which continued and increased with the advent of GNVQ. I have presented a volume of evidence that control was moving from the Boards to the state

in the guise of a state-appointed regulator. Additional and, I suggest, conclusive evidence for this power shift forms the core of the next chapter.

However, reflecting on my initial assumption that this power shift formed part of a wider strategy of marketisation, I must acknowledge that the evidence suggests a different interpretation of what happened to the examining boards during the 1990s. Although marketisation may have been altering other sectors of the “*educational state*”, the Boards experienced a virtual suppression of their established market. Their freedom to trade as providers of English qualifications was dependent on a regulatory licence, their products were controlled, and their prices subject to regulatory capping. This reversal of a general trend has become clear only as a result of assessing the evidence.

At the same time, I believe I have provided glimpses of the gradual decline in trust which I suggested at the end of the previous chapter is the underlying shift that is taking place in England. The State, in its quest for accountability, invokes ever-tightening central regulation as the means to that end, without taking cognisance of the cost of suppressing professional responsibility – whether in examining boards, teachers or medical staff. I argue in the next chapter that the events of September 2002 provide clear evidence of such a cost in overriding the professional judgement of experienced assessors.

Chapter 5 The A-level Grades Crisis of September 2002: The Boards become hostages to fortune

In August 2003, *The Guardian*'s editorial referred to the previous year's crisis as "*the most damaging event in the [A level] exam's history*". (*The Guardian* 14 August 2003) I shall consider this dramatic episode in the history of English examining boards from the perspective of control: where power lay as between on the one hand the three awarding bodies and on the other the grouping of their regulator, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the education department (DfEE, then DfES) and the Government as represented by ministers. Evidence will be cited to suggest that by September 2002 the examining boards had lost control over what had always been their professional preserve: both the A-level subject specifications and the examinations to assess them. By this stage they were effectively providing an administrative service without the ability to exercise their professional judgement. In trying to sustain a particular argument based on such very recent events, I shall be instructed by Denis Lawton's observation about his attempt twenty years ago to assess the growing central control of the curriculum: "*Part of the difficulty in trying to write about continuing developments is that it is rarely possible to tell a complete story with a happy (or even an unhappy) ending*" (Lawton 1984: Preface) In this instance the 'story' is certainly not complete, although I will suggest possible alternative directions it may take.

The chapter is structured with an introduction followed by three sections. The first will concentrate on the period of the design of *Curriculum 2000* prior to its launch in September 2000. Then a brief section on some initial problems will be followed by an analysis of the issues that surfaced in the crisis of September 2002. Much of the

evidence will necessarily be derived from press coverage in the absence of other sources considering such recent events. The lens through which the events will be considered will be the perspective of the Boards. My contention is that with the advent of *Curriculum 2000* effective control had moved inexorably from a putative partnership to reside fully in QCA hands – hands which may be considered a proxy for government control.

A basic difficulty with this approach comes from attempting to establish a clear binary position for the locus of power as between the three awarding bodies on the one hand and QCA, the DfEE/DfES and the Government on the other. On one side, the examining boards are difficult to treat as a single entity because they are becoming more divergent than they have ever been – partly I will claim, in response to their diminishing control over their core business.

On the other side, the lack of clarity in the relationship between QCA and the DfEE/DfES compounds the questions which have always existed about the division of responsibility between a minister and his/her advisers. This issue was raised directly in the wake of the events of September 2002, when a Liberal Democrat MP questioned QCA's independence from government *"following revelations that its deputy chief executive [Beverley Evans] is a civil servant from the education department."* Phil Willis's letter asked the Minister, *"How can the government have no role in the QCA's operations when a serving civil servant from your department occupies so senior a position there?"* (EducationGuardian.co.uk 10 October 2002)

Even the new Chief Executive of QCA admitted shortly after taking up his post that:

In the education sector, the QCA does not have the conspicuous independence that is the foundation of the credibility and authority of Ofsted, which is accountable not to the Department for Education and Skills, but to Parliament. Nor does it have the authority of bodies that regulate competitive markets in

other sectors and in other countries, such as the public provision of transport or energy or financial services.

(Boston 2002: 12)

Leaving aside considerations as to his view of QCA as a regulator equivalent to the Financial Services Authority, Ken Boston's admission of the equivocal position QCA occupies supports my case that it is difficult to separate out the responsibility for policy decisions. Therefore I shall proceed on the basis that separating the strands of power within that combination of forces is beyond the scope of this research. While several interviewees have suggested that references to "*the Minister*" are probable shorthand for civil servants' influence, for the purposes of this analysis, QCA as the regulator will be treated as the locus of power confronted by the awarding bodies.

When QCA was established in 1997, the booklet which introduced it – claiming a 'Mission' for coherence and 'Values' which are open – described its 'Partners' in prose which conceals more than it reveals:

*The **Government**, which is responsible for maintaining the skills base of the nation. QCA is a non-departmental government body under the Department for Education and Employment, and has close links with it.*

***Awarding bodies**, which offer a wide range of qualifications including GCSEs, GCEs, GNVQs and NVQs. They are responsible for syllabus development, centre approval, standardisation of marking and quality assurance.*

(QCA 1997: 7)

The conundrum implied by the status of a non-departmental government body "*under*" a named department did not disappear with time. While acknowledging the fluid nature of these distinctions, I shall base my analysis on the working assumption of a binary division which gradually shifted from a partnership in 1997 to one of patron/client as QCA gradually garnered to itself the most important of the responsibilities it had initially perceived as resting with the awarding bodies. The analysis of the significant change as *Curriculum 2000* took shape will concentrate on the movement in this power relationship. Therefore the emphasis will be on the

process of the reform rather than a detailed consideration of the AS/A2 structure, except where specific issues around the changes to the qualifications illustrate the source of control.

1 Redesigning a Qualification: Amateurs instructing professionals

Despite these being the first real changes to A levels since their creation in 1947, there is no document to cite which explains the changes embodied in *Curriculum 2000*. The proposed new structure was outlined in the consultation document *Qualifying for Success* circulated by the Department for Education and Employment following the New Labour 1997 election victory. The purpose of the consultation was made clear in the introduction:

This consultation seeks views on how to implement our manifesto commitment for qualifications – to broaden A levels and upgrade vocational qualifications, underpinning them with rigorous standards and Key Skills. It also seeks views on whether and how to move towards an overarching certificate to recognise achievement across these qualifications. It aims to build on the recommendations in the Dearing Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds, published in March 1996.
(DfEE 1997b: 3)

There was some concern amongst advocates of qualification reform when this document indicated “*a considerable reduction of [Labour’s] objectives [as] outlined in its pre-election Aiming Higher.*” The proposed changes “*had not gone far enough in a unified direction, did not promote accessibility to advanced level and remained voluntarist*” (Hodgson 2003). However, the consultation proceeded and the results were announced in spring 1998 – confirming that A levels would move to a two-tier, fully modular structure. The lower 6th or year 12 would comprise four or five subjects comprising three Advanced Supplementary (AS) modules which could be used as a stand-alone qualification. The upper 6th or year 13 (A2) would build on three of those subjects through three further modules, resulting in one overall grade for each subject

completed. Students could also study vocational subjects through a revised GNVQ structure and were expected also to work on Key Skills in literacy, numeracy and information technology.

The process of schools and colleges adjusting to these changes was researched by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours, and analysed in their 2003 book *Beyond A Levels: Curriculum 2000 and the Reform of 14-19 Qualifications*. As longstanding advocates of a unified qualifications framework, they make the point that the reform:

...could more accurately be termed 'Qualifications 2000' [with its] voluntarist approach, [leaving] market forces to determine which of the new qualifications blocks schools and colleges would offer, what learners would decide to take, and what higher education institutions and employers would recognize. (Hodgson 2003: 160)

They concluded that *"New Labour committed a fundamental political error in choosing the compromised, partial and short-term perspectives of Dearing rather than the more radical, comprehensive and longer-term approach of Aiming Higher"* (Hodgson 2003: 159). They attributed the new government's decision to the demands of *"...Third Way politics...playing to both traditional and progressive educational opinions."* They felt that some of the design flaws of the reformed qualifications derive from the fact that they *"were never seriously discussed with education professionals whose experience of delivery might have ground out some of the most obvious mistakes"* (Hodgson 2003: 160). As seems always to be the case with such academic overviews, the writers do not include the awarding bodies among *"education professionals"*. They characterised the period following the consultation, which ended in spring 1998, as *"followed by a protracted period of silence of almost two years while ministers and the officials from the DfEE, QCA and awarding bodies discussed the designs of the new qualifications."* These discussions *"took place largely behind closed doors"* (Hodgson 2003: 160).

From the perspective of the awarding bodies, while their representatives may have been behind those closed doors, their misgivings, based on professional judgement and assessment expertise, were essentially either questioned or ignored. Even non-partisan advice seemed to carry no weight. A report written in 1998 for QCA by Roger Porkiss, experienced examiner turned maths consultant who had been commissioned to design one of OCR's new specifications, had warned QCA that "*the system would lead to a rise in high grades...*" (*The Observer*, 22 September 2002: 8).

Although the Boards had been experiencing gradual inroads into their original independence since the middle of the twentieth century, QCA was now exerting control of a quite different order from what they had known during the creation of either GCEs in the late 1940s or even GCSE in the mid 1980s. For the examining boards, there was to be no question of voluntarism: QCA's requirements were compulsory.

The time factor

The process of creating the new qualifications absorbed an inordinate amount of time. Initially, the Boards had expected a less radical Dearing-based reform to be implemented in 1999. An official from one board explained how delay and subsequent changes proved costly to the Boards:

When the decision was made to implement some of [Dearing's] more radical suggestions, it was a bit late in the day. Because...there was intended to be a 'Curriculum 1999', although it wasn't called that. All of the boards were geared up to producing [that version] and indeed we'd done most of the work. Certainly from Edexcel's point of view, our expenditure had just about exceeded £1 million when ministers decided everything would go on hold and be changed radically for the following year. Interestingly enough, that development cost was borne entirely by the Boards, and multiplied up by, in fact five, because Wales and Northern Ireland were all involved. And it did create a large hole in our budget.
(Edexcel2 2003)

However a less obvious cost was in time. The protracted discussions and debates left insufficient time for the proper processes of development, because, “*for most of us there is a two-year lead time to preparing an exam paper*” (Edexcel2 2003) Yet essential decisions could not be taken by Board staff because it was clear that the power to make final decisions lay elsewhere. The same official expressed this feeling:

Throughout the whole, we thought there was considerable political interference in both the pace of curriculum development and some of the decisions that needed to be made. Many of the decisions were allegedly ‘with ministers’, which is code for the ‘civil servants’ normally.
(Edexcel2 2003)

As time was passing and QCA was still withholding approval of many of the new subject specifications, the Boards suggested postponing the implementation of the new system for another year. They were aware that schools and colleges recruit in the autumn for the following year’s intake to post-16 courses. Those institutions were understandably keen to be clearer about the courses for which they were recruiting; yet it was not until 19 March 1999 that a letter went out to Heads and Principals from the DfEE informing them that “*QCA will be sending you a briefing document on the details behind the reforms early next month*” (DfEE 1999). The understandable frustration of the institutions at such a delay was directed toward the awarding bodies, who were perceived to be slow at producing their new specifications.

As the first year of the new all-modular structure proceeded, a dawning realisation of some consequent pressures were surfacing in the education press:

Large sixth-form colleges may struggle to cope with this summer's A-levels because popular exams for students in the upper and lower sixth have been scheduled for the same day.

(TES 19 January 2001: 10)

The work is taking up so much time that it doesn't leave much for anything else," said Harriet Riley, 17, who is studying English, art, drama and general studies.

(TES 18 May 2001: 24)

As many as 100,000 students will take the new exam and as a result the cost of exam fees, invigilators, new desks, administration staff and full-time examination officers has increased as much as 50 per cent for some schools.

(TES 8 June 2001: 6)

At Colchester sixth-form college staff are grappling with a logistical nightmare to ensure that students get the chance to sit their papers. The number of exam entries at the college, which has more than 2,000 students, has more than tripled to 24,000 this year. The exam budget...will be £320,000, a huge rise on the £178,000 spent last year.

(TES 8 June 2001:6)

This early frustration was one of the contributing factors that fuelled the schools' outburst of anger with the awarding bodies in September 2002. Of course QCA did not confess to its role in holding up specifications nor did the DfEE explain that the timetable was politically driven and there was to be no question of delay. They followed the prudent practice of saying nothing and did not admit to any responsibility for the timing problems. This left the Boards in an invidious position. Had they responded by blaming QCA for the delay or made public their requests for postponing implementation of the new system, they would have been publicly acknowledging their weakness. Nonetheless, I consider that this failure to defend themselves in the face of the frustration expressed by schools and colleges to be another indication of their loss of autonomy.

Structural weaknesses: building in grade inflation

There were myriad minor disputes which reinforced the powerless status of the Boards. One Board official detected the influence of a strong hand during the process of approving the new syllabuses – henceforth to be known as specifications¹¹:

We had countless very small but accumulated [changes]. They aggregated to become something big. Small influences: for example, the approval of syllabuses. The detail and the changes forced on us which in truth have made assessment difficult. And in some cases stupid! They were telling the experts, 'This is what you've got to do.' That's not regulation; that's government stipulation. Well, and then I'm not even sure that...it's Government. I can't believe the politicians...are the ones doing it. It's a group of people who are acting under some sort of aegis that they believe that they got for themselves that other people find difficult to challenge. Now challenge you could do, until it [regulation] became statutory. But once you've made them statutory, challenges become very difficult, because there's no appeal mechanism.

(OCR2 2003)

There were apparently minor issues the Boards tried in vain to raise as needing more reflection:

Things like re-sit rules, things like requirements for synoptic assessment, et cetera were all a bit poorly thought through. And also the 'one size fits all' model, in other words all subjects go into six modules, was a backward step; some of the more successful modular syllabuses had been four rather than six.

(Edexcel2 20003)

This is clear evidence that in matters involving assessment expertise the Boards were no longer able to win arguments. Control had passed out of their hands and had now effectively moved to government agencies, if not to Government itself

From at least one viewpoint on the regulatory side, it appeared that a parallel process was inhibiting regulatory decisions: in this case, it seemed that policy ruled regardless of findings based on evidence. Even here it seemed that important decisions were being made elsewhere:

It doesn't matter what you've found; if it's not comfortable with the policy, it doesn't matter. So there were elements of that. I suppose it's always that interesting thing in those policy-gearred places like QCA that there is the buzz of policy – but there's also the total frustration it dictates. It doesn't matter what you've found, if it's not comfortable with the policy it doesn't matter. And that whole fascinating thing about how decisions are made – and rarely are they

made on sifting carefully the evidence, because...everybody's moving from one meeting to the next so quickly that nobody actually reflects on very much at all. I mean, there were several of us, including the awarding bodies, who were arguing...about how you combine AS and A2 scores and warning about what was going to happen.

But then you're told that this cannot be countenanced by the Minister, who probably hasn't said a thing about it at that point. You know, that whole 'Minister is minded' sort of mind-reading bit which is deeply frustrating because ministers are often much more flexible than the people who are protecting them.

(QCA3 2004)

This perception that ministers are in some way at the mercy of their civil servants has a long history and some reliable data, as well as television's Sir Humphrey, to support it. However there may be a decision-making network that is more complex than appears on the surface. This was certainly the case in the central issue in the dispute over grades in September 2002.

This was the critical matter of the combination of AS/A2 scores to produce a final grade. The source of the problem was a combination of semantic and mathematical misunderstandings. In their research into the early stages of *Curriculum 2000*, Hodgson and Spours reported that Lord Dearing, in confirming that the new AS proposed in his 1996 Report would form a constituent sub-set of the full A-level course as well as a self-standing qualification in its own right, also:

...confirmed that the weighting for the AS, in terms of the total A level grade, would be 40 per cent and 60 per cent for the rest of the A level (later to become known as A2), because the former was intellectually less demanding than the latter. At the same time, however, he argued that in terms of UCAS points, performance tables and national targets, the AS should count as 50 [per cent of an A level] because it was covering half the content and half of the time of a full A level. The reason for the allocation of 50 per cent UCAS points was to incentivize the take-up of the AS for broadening purposes.

(Hodgson 2003: 83)

Dearing's entirely sensible differentiation between the 40/60 weighting of AS/A in producing a final overall grade as distinct from the allocation of 50% of UCAS points for each award proved too complex for general consumption. Following the 1998

consultation by New Labour via *Qualifying for Success* “*the issue of credit value was clarified with the AS now counting for 50 per cent of the A level grade as well as 50 per cent in terms of UCAS points and in performance tables*” (Hodgson 2003: 84). The use of the agentless passive “*was clarified*” can be assumed to indicate responsibility to rest with either a minister’s Labour Party political advisers or education department civil servants. What is certain is that no one with any sound grasp of the results of such a ‘clarification’ would have failed to realise that it would mean an inevitable rise in grades.

Yet both an able administrator and an intelligent Minister endorsed the decision. In January 1999, Sir William Stubbs, Chairman of QCA, wrote to Baroness Blackstone, Junior Minister with responsibility for qualifications. He was reporting on the proposed changes that the regulatory authority had developed “*to implement the Government’s policy to broaden A levels....*” Introducing the criteria for the new Advanced Subsidiary examination, he referred to “*a new AS qualification representing the first half of the full A level and contributing half the weighting*” (Stubbs 1999: 6). This letter provides incontrovertible evidence that Sir William suffered a form of cognitive dissonance regarding the finer points of assessment. His advocacy of equal weighting for AS and A2 was in direct conflict with his second firm principle about maintaining standards over time, reported on the BBC’s website:

QCA chairman Sir William Stubbs said on Wednesday the three awarding bodies “had it made perfectly clear to them that they had to maintain standards over time, that the standards of A-level were not expected to go up, nor were they expected to decline, and they have been reminded of that a number of times.”

(BBC.co.uk 19 September 2002)

The representatives of the Boards had argued against equal weighting from the outset, as recalled by a QCA official:

...there were several of us who were arguing that, you know, that the whole combination – and including the awarding bodies – about how you combine AS and A2 scores and warning about what was going to happen, and all that kind of thing. And I know lots of people have come out of the woodwork and said, 'It was my idea' and 'We said it' and I think in truth there were three or four groups saying it at the same time: that the way to do it is to separate it. But then you're told that this cannot be countenanced by the Minister....
(QCA3 2003)

Those who could foresee the inevitable result of equal weighting tried to explain that the standard students might be expected to attain at the end of one year of study could not reasonably be as high as that at the end of two years. Therefore AS level assessments would have to be set at a lower standard than those of A2. If the two sets of results were then weighted equally, there was a mathematical certainty of higher grades – leading to the dreaded accusations of 'grade inflation'. Their arguments were to no avail. When Baroness Blackstone replied to Sir William Stubbs on 19 March, she endorsed the equal weighting in unmistakable terms:

Where the AS represents the first half of the A level, it should contribute 50% of the marks available for the full A level.
(Blackstone 1999: 1)

It is difficult to understand how two intelligent people, no matter what their advisers were telling them, could have failed to foresee the inevitable result of this decision. It was all the more puzzling in view of the opposite approach being taken with regard to GNVQ assessment. Here, because the individual could select from a variety of modules to put together a three-unit, a six-unit or a twelve-unit course, it had been deemed necessary for reasons of rigour to assess all units at the synoptic level – that is, making no allowance in degree of difficulty for modules taken during the first year of study. It was again evident to those experienced in assessment that the proposals were building in a disparity in outcomes between A levels and AVCEs (the new title

for Advanced GNVQs) despite an overriding objective of the whole reform being to bridge the academic-vocational divide. This refusal by QCA and the Minister to accept sound professional advice from the awarding bodies confirms that their proven competence in technical assessment matters no longer carried any weight. They had become clients rather than equal partners.

There were additional inflationary features of the new structure whose effect no one seemed to have anticipated: the opportunity for students to re-sit modules in order to improve their results and to discard the weakest of their AS levels and carry on with their three strongest subjects. Because students would receive the results of their three AS modules serially, they could decide to re-sit modules where their results were unsatisfactory. Then, when embarking on their A2 year, it would clearly be in their interest to continue only with those subjects which would earn them the highest total points for university entrance applications. These factors would, like the equal weighting decision, have meant an inevitable upward drift in results. Perhaps only those working in schools who understood the instrumental approach students take towards subject choice in order to maximize their chances could have foreseen this behaviour, and as Hodgson and Spours had found, those educationists were left completely outside the discussions of *Curriculum 2000* (Hodgson 2003: 160).

A final factor that was overlooked was the motivation teachers now had to ensure that their students achieved the best possible outcomes. Once the annual publication of 'league tables' of examination results had begun, those results had become of vital importance not just to the candidates but to the future of the institution they had attended. Assessment research has uncovered consistent evidence to endorse the

ability of teachers to maximise the performance of their students if there is external pressure to do so. One expert in the field expressed this finding:

If you make a particular performance indicator a policy target and make the stakes high enough, then the people at the sharp end will do everything they can to improve their score on the performance indicator.
(Wiliam 2001: 59)

Regulating the qualifications market

A third issue that concerned the Boards was QCA's approach to reducing the number of specifications. Although the wide variety of syllabuses had been developed in response to the demands of teachers over the years, the Boards had accepted Lord Dearing's observation that, in the interests of comparability, "*There is a strong case for reducing syllabus numbers in a controlled and systematic way to improve the quality of examinations and to enable a more comprehensive monitoring programme to be carried out*" (Dearing 1996: 87). Their concern at QCA's manner of reducing the syllabus numbers changed to alarm when a letter from a QCA official to the Joint Council for General Qualifications stated bluntly that:

The number of specifications should reflect the reduction in the number of awarding bodies in England. It is not appropriate for one of the three awarding bodies in England to offer 30% more specifications than the other two; the numbers of specifications in art, economics, English, psychology, and media studies offered by AQA are not consistent with the overall pattern of provision.
(QCA 1999)

This was particularly difficult to accept in the context of market forces and the enforced merger of the two Boards offering the largest number of A-level syllabuses which in 1998 had handled 65% of the A-level entry (Tattersall 1999). [see **Figure 4.3**]

A compromise of sorts was agreed, but this issue was further proof that the Boards were no longer free to design qualifications suited to their different client groups.

Decisions about what they were allowed to offer were being taken with no regard to previous patterns of choice by teachers. They were now in the position of ‘licensed traders’ whose products could be offered only with the *imprimatur* of QCA, who were running a strictly controlled market.

QCA’s Leadership Problems

At the most critical period in its brief existence, QCA experienced major changes at the top which were to affect the way it dealt with the problems resulting from the new qualification structure. First, in summer 2000 the founding Chief Executive, Dr Nicholas Tate, resigned to become Head of Winchester School. After the events of September 2002, Tate was quoted as telling the Headmasters’ Conference that:

As early as 1996, we were worried about how we were going to get the grading right. If we had been more open about the fact that grades were likely to go up, there would have been less concern when they did.
(*The Daily Telegraph* 2 October 2002: 1)

This was something of an understatement. His successor was Professor David Hargreaves, who took the helm as *Curriculum 2000* was launched in September 2000. In the first year of the new structure, head teachers complained about the problems they faced in running so many additional examinations, students criticised the timetabling which meant some had to sit multiple papers in a single day, and teachers felt they were rushing to complete modules. These ‘teething problems’ were investigated by Professor Hargreaves, who produced a rather anodyne report, suggested improvements to the examining timetable then promptly resigned his post. He too, in hindsight, confessed to the Headmasters’ Conference that “*there was a time when he was responsible for the new exam that he thought the best course would be ‘to pull the whole thing apart’*” (*The Daily Telegraph* 2 October: 1) The heads were reported as noting that neither Dr Tate nor Professor Hargreaves seemed to accept any

responsibility for the debacle, nor did either explain why they had failed to warn the Government of the impending storm. This failure to accept responsibility seemed to be normal behaviour at QCA.

Following Professor Hargreaves' sudden departure, QCA's board faced a leadership hiatus at this crucial time; their solution was to appoint their chairman, Sir William Stubbs, as acting Chief Executive until they could arrange to appoint Professor Hargreaves' successor. This decision, like that over the weighting of AS and A2 grades, had serious consequences.

Sir William Stubbs was a very experienced education administrator who had risen to become the last Chief Executive of the Inner London Education Authority before its abolition, then gone on to lead the Further Education Funding Council. Descriptions of him regularly hint at a combative nature: "*rumbustious as ever*" or "*respected but not liked [in QCA]*". (*The Guardian*, 28 September 2002: 5) More important, perhaps, was his complete lack of experience of the finer points of examination assessment when he was about to be involved in a crisis which hinged precisely on assessment details. In his combined role of QCA Chairman and Chief Executive, Sir William was very much in charge of all the discussions with the examining boards as *Curriculum 2000* took shape. The questionable decision over AS/A2 weighting which he commended to Baroness Blackstone was referred to above. It was only in May 2002 that a new Chief Executive was eventually appointed, to take up his post in September 2002 and face the consequences of Sir William's actions.

The new leader of QCA was Ken Boston, an Australian who had successfully managed the introduction of a scheme of vocational education in New South Wales. The enthusiasm he was expected to bring to widening the appeal of vocational

education in England had no chance to flourish. He had barely arrived at the QCA office in Piccadilly before the crisis burst upon him.

2 The September 2002 fiasco: Awarding bodies in the dock

Following the first set of results for the restructured A2 qualification, the reliability of some of the grades awarded was questioned at a national level in September 2002. Press coverage of what became known as ‘the A-level fiasco’ began with an article in *The Observer* of 1 September detailing the inexplicable result for a Hertfordshire student whose expected A grade was dragged down to a C because an examining board had awarded U grades to the two final modules. The perceived injustice of such an outcome hinged on the fact that the student then failed to meet the grade requirement for her university place. Over the next fortnight, an ever-growing number of similar cases emerged, until 13th September, when the *TES* published a front page article headlined: **Teachers’ outrage at exam board A level fix**. The charge by a considerable number of head teachers was that the awarding bodies had altered some students’ module results to ensure that the new A2 grades were not inflated in relation to preceding A-level results. Such was the resulting media furore that the QCA’s bound collection of one month’s press cuttings on the issue weighed 2.4 kilos (QCA 2002b).

As discussed above, decisions taken despite the Boards’ protests had virtually ensured higher grades for the A2. Therefore the crisis is considered as conclusive evidence of the Boards’ role having become that of virtual pawns in the system. They were caught between head-teachers’ irate accusations of unfair meddling with marks and Sir William Stubbs’ insistence that he had done nothing more than make clear to the

Board that standards must be maintained. In fact, he went so far as to make a statement to the press that seemed to be a confession of his responsibility for the grade changes to anyone who knew of his earlier insistence on the equal weighting of AS and A2 modules:

QCA chairman Sir William Stubbs said on Wednesday that the three awarding bodies 'had it made perfectly clear to them that they had to maintain standards over time, that the standards of A-level were not expected to go up, nor were they expected to decline, and they have been reminded of that a number of times.

(bbc.co.uk 18 September 2002)

To quell the outcry, Education Minister Estelle Morris requested that QCA conduct an immediate investigation into the grading process. Ken Boston, in post at QCA for barely a fortnight, took charge and reported on 20 September that “*some teachers or schools...might not have understood what was expected of pupils under the new A-level exam system*” (bbc.co.uk 20 September 2002) This suggestion raised the level of outrage in schools still further. Many of the schools involved were in the private sector and had a financial interest in protecting the reputation of their teachers as above reproach. The result was that the Minister asked Mike Tomlinson, former Chief Inspector of Schools, to carry out another investigation into the affair. He was to report initially by 27 September with recommendations for solving the grading controversy so that aggrieved students would have their status clarified. Then he would continue his investigations to produce a full report by the beginning of December.

The heat was taken out of the crisis with the publication of Tomlinson's Interim Report on 27 September. He broadly exonerated both QCA and the Boards, who clearly had felt under pressure from QCA to “*deliver outcomes largely in line with the performance of students in 2001*”, but did acknowledge that “*the actions taken with*

regard to the marks...did vary across the three boards." OCR had made more radical alterations to bring grades into line with previous norms. His wider conclusions were that the roots of the problem lay *"in decisions made by the DfES and QCA"* and, as cited above, *"a longstanding misunderstanding of the difference between maintaining a standard and the proportion of candidates meeting that standard"* (Tomlinson 2002a).

The Boards were required to reconsider all instances of borderline grades, and ultimately *"1,945 candidates received higher overall AS and A grades"* (Tomlinson 2002b: para 10). Estelle Morris dismissed the truculent Sir William Stubbs immediately and resigned herself later in October, both casualties of the affair.

However, it is the position of the Boards that is of concern here: as the crisis progressed, their role altered perceptibly from that of actor responsible for wronging students to that of victim of others' decisions. In what was intended as a political slur on the government, the Daily Mail perhaps inadvertently summed up their position:

Given this impossible position, where the QCA has responsibility without power, it is no surprise that it presided over the persistent watering down of exam standards, allowing successive ministers to claim success for their education policy. At the same time, it has tightened its grip on the supposedly independent exam boards, who are frightened of losing their licences and do as they are told.

(Daily Mail 21 September 2002: 7)

Damaging fallout from the crisis

The Boards' reputation was, of course, severely tarnished by the whole episode. Tomlinson's Interim Report had absolved them of culpability, but had qualified this general exoneration with the words:

I am, however, concerned that the OCR AO (Accountable Officer, ie Chief Executive) judged that his duty to maintain the standard made it necessary to

lift grade boundaries in a significant number of units so substantially in the light of statistical evidence.

(Tomlinson 2002b: para 34)

Subsequent conversations with several of my acquaintances from the examinations world reveal a widespread view that the Boards would have emerged from the crisis in a better light if the Chief Executive of OCR had followed the Minister's example by resigning. His remaining in his post reinforced the impression that the Boards cannot be held responsible for their actions because genuine control resides elsewhere. Perhaps, had he acknowledged as he did when interviewed in 2004 that 2002 "*was the first really common A-level exam at OCR*" (OCR2 2003), he might have gone some way to explaining that the difficulty was specific to OCR rather than a fault in the whole system. Certainly that was the retrospective view of another examining board manager:

What was wrong with Curriculum 2000 was that it created a very complex technical problem and it went wrong in one awarding body. [The Chief Executive of OCR] alone decided against dealing with the complexity. That was the cause of the whole thing. One board's decision affected a small number of candidates. There was no real crisis.

(AQA3 2005)

This was far from the general view prevalent at the time. In the national press the Boards' reputation had been repeatedly impugned, and the need for their existence questioned in an unprecedented manner. After suggesting that the September 2002 crisis should be regarded as evidence that "*the whole system of public examining in England is not worthy of the confidence of parents, students or teachers*", *The Times* raised the issue of comparability:

The more serious [than bureaucratic errors] accusation, however, is that exam boards acquire a specialism in terms of their clients (some 90 per cent of independent schools use OCR for example) and this may influence policy. The suspicion remains that the same individual could acquire varying grades for essentially the same material depending on which board held their scripts.

(*The Times* 7 September: 21)

The *Daily Telegraph* also assumed varying levels of rigour among the Boards:

Schools that choose the OCR – and they are by no means all fee-paying – do so precisely because it is seen as the most rigorous of all the examining boards. (The Daily Telegraph 17 September: 21)

Although it would seem logical for a school determined to exploit differences among the Boards to select the one most likely to produce the most favourable grades, this suspicion that one was “*more rigorous*” than another had survived virtually from the Boards’ creation. One of the aims of merging the examining boards had been to put an end to concerns about comparability. It seemed that the grading crisis had resurrected such concerns, and cast a shadow over the Boards.

The Boards may no longer have been in control of the qualifications they administered, but a subtext in the media coverage suggested that they were somehow both incompetent and financially motivated in introducing *Curriculum 2000*. A headline in *The Times* of 24 September claimed that “**Schools pay £40m a year to boards**”. Although the article stated correctly that “*costs have risen sharply under the Government’s ‘Curriculum 2000’ reforms*”, there was no indication that there would have been corresponding increases in the costs to the Boards of administering all those modular units.

Gratuitous blows were aimed from other quarters. Conor Ryan, who had acted as a special adviser during David Bunklett’s four years as Secretary of State for Education – and presumably been involved in establishing QCA, wrote severely in *The Independent*:

There is no justification for having three competing boards. Competition has produced little innovation, and their credibility was poor before recent allegations. (The Independent 26 September: 2, 3)

Acting to defend the government – which Tomlinson’s Interim Report was to absolve of influencing “*the expected outcomes*”(Tomlinson 2002a) – Graham Lane was even more merciless in attacking the Boards. Speaking as chair of the Education Committee of the Local Government Association, he told *The Daily Telegraph*:

We do not blame the Government. We put the blame on the exam system, which is too secretive. It is a big, money-making business and the government is now seeing the effects of having exams run by private companies in competition with each other.

This episode also raises the question of whether we need just one exam board. (*The Daily Telegraph* 21 September: 8)

Occasionally journalists took a wider view and recognised that the issue was not a simple matter. The *Financial Times* interpreted the episode as revealing the perils of “*the new breed of regulators*” who have become “*new decision makers*”:

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority did what Whitehall dreads. It became a loose cannon, a rogue regulator, unpredictable, challenging its department, apparently unable to supervise its patch effectively but at the same time taking to the air waves to cause havoc elsewhere.

(*Financial Times* 3 October: 21)

Ted Wragg, a wry observer of the education scene, saw the crisis as yet another incident in the predictable chain of events that take place every August:

Every summer two sets of combustible material are rubbed together.... First we ask examination boards to process 24,000,000 scripts in very little time, a tenfold increase compared with a few years ago. The resulting mountain of paper is the tinder. The second element is an inescapable consequence of the government turning public examination results into a ‘high stakes’ issue.... That is the box of matches. Book the fire brigade in advance, as there is bound to be at least one conflagration every August.

(*Guardian Education* 24 September: 2)

After the publication of Tomlinson’s Interim Report and the resignations of Sir William Stubbs and Estelle Morris, the media focus moved elsewhere while the Boards carried out the reconsideration of the borderline cases. By the time Tomlinson’s final report was published on 2 December 2002, the issue had lost its

urgency as a focus in the media. However it was of major importance to the awarding bodies.

Tomlinson's Final Word on the Matter

Regarding the crucial issue of the relationship of QCA to the awarding bodies, Tomlinson gently rapped QCA's knuckles:

In particular there is a significant lack of clarity about the boundaries between QCA's role in overseeing and ensuring the health of the qualifications system and the awarding bodies' responsibility for operational management of that system and the qualifications outcomes to which it leads.

But it should not become involved in managing the detail of the awarding bodies' responsibilities in relation to the setting, marking and grading of A levels and other qualifications.

(Tomlinson 2002b: para 89)

He therefore recommended that:

...as clear a distinction as possible is maintained between (a) QCA's responsibility for monitoring and coordinating delivery, and for overseeing and guaranteeing standards and the general health of the qualifications system and (b) the awarding bodies' individual responsibility for managing effective delivery of their own qualifications to students, schools and colleges.

(Tomlinson 2002b: para 95)

This might have implied that the Boards were to reclaim a degree of their former autonomy. Tomlinson did endorse the continued existence of three awarding bodies, both to provide choice to users and to limit “*the risk of system failure present where there is only one*” (Tomlinson 2002b: para 100). This rather faint endorsement along the lines of ‘for fear of finding something worse’ was not lost on the examining boards because Tomlinson went on to attack “*differences between awarding bodies in their administrative practices...*”(Tomlinson 2002b: para 102) and to recommend moves toward greater consistency in fee structures, entry procedures, production of results and appeals procedures. To an examination board officer, “*all of it, I think [is]*

pointing to the independence and the different characteristics of awarding bodies disappearing”(AQA2 2003).

Eliminating the administrative distinctions between the Boards may be dismissed as a symbolic gesture. Tomlinson’s Final Report went no further. In carrying out his recommendations and working to fulfil their obligations in providing an effective qualifications service the Boards were hard pressed financially, as was demonstrated above. Loss of financial independence is certainly not symbolic, but signifies an incontrovertible diminution of autonomy. To an individual who had spent a career working at all levels in examining boards, the current situation is clear:

Increasingly, money is being offered from the centre – for example in terms of the recruitment of examiners and improving the pay of examiners. But that money comes with strings, as money always will come with strings from government. There again the supposed independence – and I do say ‘supposed’ because I think it has become more of a mirage as times have gone on – the supposed independence of the boards [is] being eroded by their increasing reliance on finances coming from the centre.
(AQA2 2003)

The above statement confirms my contention that at the end of 2002, the English examining boards could no longer be described as independent. A concluding chapter will summarise the basis for this position and suggest possible future directions for the Boards.

Chapter 6 Conclusions: The Boards in the 21st century

This final chapter will begin with a summary of the answers to my research questions and a reconsideration of the conclusions the evidence has suggested. I shall then present my overall conclusions and finish by outlining two potential scenarios, stemming from those conclusions, for the future of the English examining boards.

What does the evidence suggest? My answers to my research questions

1 How did the independent examining boards evolve?

The question as to how the curious constellation of independent examining boards evolved from their origins accrediting matriculation to particular universities was answered with historical data presented in the form of a narrative. This approach has demonstrated how what were initially almost random decisions hardened into established practice, aspects of which have lasted to the present day. Perhaps the most significant of these was the inability of Oxford and Cambridge to agree in 1859 to offer examinations jointly. This apparently minor difference of opinion set the pattern of separate university examining boards. Other aspects of the initial arrangements which were virtually set in stone from the outset were the timing of examinations in June and the age for the two levels of external examination as 16 and 18. Despite all that has changed, those basic elements of the pattern have survived, although the recent move to a modular structure has eroded the dominance of June in the examination timetable.

Then, despite recommendations in the Clarendon Report, the Taunton Report and the Bryce Report, the concept of a single national examination system was never accepted

by Victorian policy makers who saw education matters as outside the remit of central government. When the multitude of professional entry examinations led to the Dyke Acland Report in 1911 with its recommendation of a single system of accreditation, the existing university boards were charged with creating the structure of School Certificates and Higher Schools Certificates. They were then installed as the majority group in the Secondary Schools Examinations Council, established in 1918 to oversee the system. Clearly, despite the move to a national examination structure, the Boards had not only remained independent, but were virtually self regulating. Their status continued unchanged for thirty years.

2 How did changes to the examinations system affect the Boards' status?

With the 1944 Education Act and the replacement of the system of Schools Certificates by the single-subject General Certificate of Education at Ordinary and Advanced levels, the Boards experienced a first move toward central control over their operations. Firstly, they were sidelined by their own chairman Sir Cyril Norwood in the publication of his report on secondary education and examinations, which went directly to the President of the Board of Education. When they did see the report, they were alarmed to learn that Norwood had suggested that their examinations be phased out, to be replaced by schools' own assessments. That recommendation never came to pass; on the contrary, examinations became ever more firmly embedded in English educational culture. It was in relation to these examinations and a particular instance of the "*messy obscurity of policy processes*" (Ecclestone 2002: 174) that I was in danger of overlooking perhaps the most significant long-term effect of the Spens/Norwood/Butler exchanges. This was the change from the School Certificates, a grouped qualification like those common around the world, to single-

subject O levels and A levels, which made English qualifications unique. In retrospect, the embedding of English students' right to choose the subjects they study has led to the series of varied but unsuccessful attempts to build in a general education core requirement that generated the qualification reforms that I have chronicled. While I have touched briefly on the significance of the change to single subjects, this is an area of English qualifications which further research could illuminate, as it has so regularly been designated as a problem and regularly addressed by futile solutions.

At the time, however, for the Boards it seemed that the significant effect of the 1944 Act was the removal of their representatives from the Secondary Schools Examination Committee, to be replaced by civil servants from the newly designated Ministry of Education. This was the first step in what I suggest has been the gradually accelerating shift in control from the boards to the centre. Despite this perceived undermining of their position, the Boards managed successfully to devise the GCE qualifications to whose overall design they had not been invited to contribute. This pattern of the Boards' reliability in fulfilling their professional task, although overlooked in qualification design, has been a consistent feature of the English qualifications scene.

The only change to the configuration of examining boards following the opening of secondary education to all was the creation of a new Board with no university affiliation. Intended to answer the needs of the technical schools and further education colleges, with no accompanying reform to widen access to qualifications, the Associated Examining Board gradually became a clone of the others because of the English reluctance to accept applied and theoretical learning as of equal worth.

English society's steadily growing demand for qualifications assured the Boards' commercial success, particularly after the value of their O levels was enhanced by the less esteemed Certificate of Secondary Education from 1965. During the 1960s and 1970s, with a low-level regulatory regime in the hands of the teacher-dominated Schools Council, the examining boards faced a series of possible reforms to post-16 examinations, none of which came into effect. The Boards were left to carry out their function undisturbed by change, although there was little doubt of the need to improve young people's levels of attainment.

Then, in the 1980s the Thatcher Government yielded to the longstanding pressure from teachers and examining boards to replace the divisive structure of O-level and CSE with a single examination at 16+ which could accredit the whole (or rather 60%) of the age group. The price the Boards paid for this concession was a major ratcheting up of central control. The Schools Council was replaced by the Secondary Examinations Council, whose members were appointed in the name of the Secretary of State. All syllabuses and examinations for the new General Certificate of Secondary Examination had to be vetted and approved by this new regulator. This is clear evidence that for the first time, the Boards' professional expertise was to be subjected to the scrutiny of a state-appointed body.

In addition to this clear imposition of tightened central control, the indirect effects of the change to GCSE were to have a cumulative impact on the power balance between the Boards and their regulator. Improved attainment rates in the new examination combined with economic pressures on youth employment opportunities led to a steady increase in the post-16 staying-on rate. This created more pressure on the 'gate-keeping' function of examinations as increased numbers aimed for higher education

and consequently focused attention on the reliability, validity and comparability of examination grades. Because government ministers were increasingly being held responsible through constant media pressure for any problems with the system, they tightened central control through a series of changes to the regulatory body to ensure that central scrutiny over the Boards became ever more rigorous. I have identified this tendency as an aspect of the approach to public service accountability of the “*managerial state*”. (Clarke, 1997 #287)

Reflecting on my analysis, I believe I have been guilty of imposing the orthodoxy of the time on a body of evidence which – reconsidered objectively – suggests a quite different interpretation. Anticipating that the generalised effect of marketisation would have had an impact on the examining boards, I tried to present the evidence I was amassing to fit that assumption. Yet a clear assessment of that evidence leads to the unavoidable conclusion that – far from being changed from a quasi- to a fully-fledged market, the Boards’ freedom to act as a market was being steadily restricted by regulation to the point where it had virtually disappeared.

If I now accept that what happened to the examining boards was in fact the reverse of the effect of marketisation, I must then question whether the undoubted shift in the balance of power between the Boards and the regulator resulted from a conscious policy or whether it was, as it had been in the past, the unintended consequence of a series of attempts to mend flaws in the system. It must be admitted that the latter case is the more likely within the modern context of policy formation – as described above by one interviewee as: “...*that whole fascinating thing about how decisions are made – and rarely are they made on sifting carefully the evidence, because...everybody’s moving from one meeting to the next so quickly that nobody*

actually reflects on very much at all” (QCA3 2004). Ecclestone’s research detected this tendency of many policy-makers to accept “*the apparent irrationality and messiness of ‘policy on the hoof’ [as] neutral and rational*” (Ecclestone 2002: 80) It seems that my early assumption of a coherent and consciously constructed policy is best adjusted to acknowledge that it was probably more a case of benignly muddling through.

I do, however, maintain that the perceived need to mend the system resulted at least in part from a major difference of opinion regarding the basis on which grades are awarded. This led to widespread criticism of the Boards regarding the reliability and comparability of their assessments. It was not until after the crisis of September 2002 that Mike Tomlinson explained the fundamental confusion that had developed between norm and criterion referencing. While I have attempted to delineate the confusion that has grown around this issue, I have given only brief consideration to what I believe to be a deep-rooted misunderstanding amongst different sections of society. It seems to me to be an important area where further research could well assist in achieving Mike Tomlinson’s long-term aim:

Finally, I believe it to be vital that there is greater public understanding of the examination process and that as a consequence there is an end to the annual argument about A level results. The standard has not been lowered if an increased proportion of students meet it as a consequence of improved teaching and hard work.

(Tomlinson 2002b: 4)

As a result of the undermining of confidence in the Boards’ professional expertise, by the time *Curriculum 2000* was being planned, their ability to avert problems in the assessment pattern had been severely curtailed – a situation which contributed significantly, I contend, to the crisis of September 2002.

In 1992, attempts to bridge the academic/vocational divide led to the creation of a hybrid qualification which combined applied study with a core of general education, the General National Vocational Qualification. Despite its initial success across the post-16 sector, its assessment scheme was criticised as lacking the reliability that external assessment provided for academic qualifications. The solution proposed in the Dearing Report of 1996 was that the reputation for reliable assessment the examining boards had established could benefit this new arrival if they were to include it within their suite of qualifications. To this end, the Boards were required from 1997 to become 'unitary awarding bodies' offering GNVQs as well as their traditional A levels and GCSEs if they were to continue to be accredited within the English state sector. This central *diktat* meant that the Boards' organisational integrity had been breached: they were forced into mergers if they wished to survive. The effects of these imposed changes challenged their performance as never before.

I suggest that the third change to the examinations structure administered the *coup de grace* to the Boards' ability to apply their professional judgement to the complexities of assessment. This was the introduction of *Curriculum 2000*, which substantially changed the structure of A levels to that of two self-contained years involving three modules in each year. In the discussions around the appropriate weighting of the modules for the first year of study in relation to the second year, the Boards' advice was flatly over-ruled by both the Chief Executive of QCA and a Government Minister. I submit that this is conclusive evidence that the Boards have become reduced to the role of qualifications providers expected to work to specifications designed by others. They are no longer permitted to fulfil their role as skilled professionals whose expertise underwrites their product.

3 What evidence is there of a shift of control from the Boards to the State?

As well as the evidence of increased central control related to the above changes in examinations, I have produced evidence of a general tightening of central control. Whether this was part of the wider culture of the 1990s' moves to marketisation, with its preference for unification and increased accountability through central regulation, or, as I now conclude, an almost accidental consequence of a series of attempts to rectify systemic flaws, the result has been a severe reduction of the examining boards' ability to make independent decisions.

The marketisation fervour that infused the world of education after the 1988 Education Reform Act had a limited effect on the examining boards – in their case increasing the need to compete for 'clients': firstly following the introduction of GCSE and again after they were required to form unitary awarding bodies which provided GNVQs. However their market was an artificial one, in that the clientele was a fixed age-group and their 'product' was heavily regulated. After limited success in 'selling' its GCSEs, the London board was forced to merge with the more successful BTEC vocational body and continue under the name Edexcel.

When after 1997 the now unitary awarding bodies were required to offer GNVQs as well as their academic qualifications, the tables were turned and the body least favoured by the market was suddenly 'in pole position'. Edexcel had inherited BTEC's 75% market share of applied qualifications and then its financial basis was secured when it was bought by Pearson International. Next it was the previously dominant AQA which was coming under increasing financial pressure, having been forced to buy out the uneconomic GNVQs offered by City & Guilds. Similar financial

pressures would have affected OCR had it not been subsidised by its Cambridge parent.

What this quasi- or controlled market in qualifications has certainly demonstrated is that it is not a profitable enterprise. Two of the three boards have required external financial backing to make up for the inevitable shortfalls, which leaves a question mark over the future of AQA, still trying to survive on fee income alone. This may mean that the state will have to step in and take actual rather than virtual control. A fruitful area for future research is the whole question of the costs of the English examining system. Despite regular complaints by headteachers or critics of the examining boards, it is extraordinary that there has been no systematic investigation of the system's finances.

Moves to unify the regulatory bodies – from SEAC to SCAA to QCA – resulted in each instance a shift to greater control over the boards, with QCA's powers becoming statutory and therefore not subject to any form of objection by the Boards below the level of judicial appeal. This increased central control was exercised directly in 1997 to require the boards to unite with a vocational awarding body if they wished to retain accreditation as providers of English qualifications. In each of the three resulting awarding bodies the process of unification has involved stresses which interfered with their ability to function effectively, adding to the financial pressure referred to above.

With an ever-stronger regulator, the Boards' professional expertise – which would weigh heavily as their greatest asset in a genuine market – proved to carry no weight. When they objected to the proposed weighting of AS/A2 marks in the design of *Curriculum 2000*, their professional judgement was ignored. When the inevitable

‘grade inflation’ resulted, they were held responsible. This I maintain is clear evidence of their loss of professional control over the qualifications they administer.

At the same time, the consequences of these external pressures generated internal pressures that destabilised them as organisations and raised questions about the comparability, the reliability and the validity of the qualifications they offer. Evidence of their instability was a series of damaging incidents that revealed for the first time weaknesses in their ability to deliver accurate results on time. I suggest that these episodes are a direct result of the Boards’ loss of their ability to implement change at their own pace and to reach assessment decisions based on their professional expertise.

Above all, the pressures they have undergone have had serious financial consequences. I believe that these pressures may well be a major factor in determining their future.

4 The three English awarding bodies: centrally controlled but still extant

All the evidence leads me to conclude that the English examining boards by the end of 2002 can no longer be deemed to be independent in the sense that they were for most of their history. Their regulatory body is not advisory but statutory. Their organisational structure has to conform to a centrally-devised pattern, providing both academic and vocational qualifications if they are to be accredited as providers within the English state system. The qualifications they provide are designed centrally and the specifications they draw up are vetted in detail by a government agency before being accepted. Their administrative procedures must conform to a national pattern

which they must agree with their competitors. Their fees are now subject to the possibility of capping by the regulator, so they no longer exercise the level of financial control they once held. Yet there is much more to the story than a simple collapse into virtual serfdom.

Firstly, although I stand by the case that the Boards have become centrally controlled, I do not claim they are alone in experiencing this shift. The move toward central control could be seen in terms of an unstoppable cultural – or even global – phenomenon rather than simply an aspect of the “*managerial state*” (Clarke 1997) or what has been described as “*Labour’s atavistic centralising urge*” (*Education Guardian* 25 January 2005: 17).

A different slant on increased centralisation is suggested by John Kay in his recent article on ‘Market States’:

Modern European government is principally a provider of goods and services. The most important of these services are economic and physical security plus health, education and the infrastructure of everyday life. This makes government an economic agent little different from other economic agents, and modern government is judged by similar criteria.
(Kay 2005)

These two interpretations neatly encapsulate what I now perceive to be the shift that has gradually taken place in my interpretation of the Clarke and Newman concept of “*the managerial state*”. (Clarke 1997) When I began my research, I saw increasing central control as one of the negative functions of marketisation. The evidence I uncovered has suggested that perhaps my position was a rigid, ideological one.

The first inkling that I was perhaps overlooking something came when I re-read Peter Gosden’s suggestion that in the 1940s Board of Education officials were motivated by other factors than a simple quest for power:

This emphasis on the need for the Board to assert itself and to offer active leadership corresponded exactly to the increasingly widespread view that the disparity of provision between the various local authorities was no longer acceptable and that far more emphasis needed to be placed on national policy; only greater centralization could undo the inequity between children of different districts which became so apparent during the evacuation and could ensure that there would be more purposeful national planning in education.
(Gosden, 1976 #146: 240)

Then I began further to rethink my position after reading Michael Barber's description of being unable, in opposing the 1988 Education Act, to offer positive solutions to what was clearly an unacceptable state of affairs.:

We...had missed two fundamental points....Firstly, we offered no credible alternative to what was perceived by the public at large ...to be an inadequate existing state of affairs. Secondly, we had completely failed to identify a series of underlying social changes which would sooner or later have forced a radical shift in education policy whether we liked it or not.
(Barber 1996: 37)

Data I have considered which demonstrate the unacceptably low rates of attainment by English young people are convincing evidence that the current qualification system is still unacceptable. I concede that, since the voluntarist approach of the Schools Council in the 1960s and 1970s was ineffectual, government has a responsibility to take remedial action; accepting that responsibility is not necessarily a simple quest for power.

A reassessment of my evidence indicates that the centralisation process may have been the result less of a clear-cut policy than of a series of attempts to address admitted weaknesses. Nevertheless, I suggest that at least some of the resulting problems might have been alleviated had the examining boards been invited to contribute and involve their high level of assessment expertise. The State' adopting of an oppositional position and imposing change has not succeeded. A more positive approach would involve these bodies who are genuinely motivated to contribute to finding effective solutions to the need for qualification change. In a recent

conversation, an awarding body Chief Executive spoke of their continuing commitment:

There is no sign of either OCR or Edexcel pulling out of it all. OCR has always said it would get out when faced with change it didn't like, but it's right in there as ever. What is our real concern is the strange orthodoxy in QCA that to make the Diploma [proposed by Tomlinson and the 2005 White Paper] work, we have to think about changing everything. There is no acknowledgement of the enormous risks involved in this approach. Could we please look at the alternative of giving the awarding bodies the job of doing it and stop destabilising things with suggestions of change?
(AQA3 2005)

What future awaits the boards: public and bureaucratic or independent and democratic?

In line with my changed interpretation of the centralisation impulse, I can envisage two versions of possible future developments, the rather doom-laden one I produced originally and a more positive one following further reflection.

This is more than merely idle speculation. I believe that the destiny of the examining boards has serious implications for English qualifications and, given their important 'gate-keeping' function in society, for the young people whom they accredit. My research has, I maintain, demonstrated that there exists a social consensus around the issue of qualifications which has consistent parameters. Any attempt to bring about change which ignores those parameters is unlikely to succeed in becoming embedded in the nation's culture. Whether inspired by government's quest for accountability or reformers' enthusiasm, any design which hopes to succeed must take account of the pragmatism which has consistently dominated English responses to reform. Wholesale change does not accord with that pragmatism. Yet government cannot

simply accept the *status quo* because it is not addressing the needs of English young people. How will the inevitable change come about?

Worst Case Scenario: Nationalisation by default

I believe that the following consequences could flow directly from the Boards' loss of independence. Some of these I base on the evidence I have submitted, particularly the interviews I carried out. Others are signalled in the White Paper of February 2005 which itself is a response to the Tomlinson Report of October 2004.

The likely outcome of this first scenario is that two Boards may restructure to protect their independence, while the third will have no option but to become the franchised provider of English qualifications. While AQA lacks other means of survival, both OCR and Edexcel are poised to develop their respective specialisms which will both evade the tight control of QCA and generate the income that their position as part of a larger business requires. An official from another board summarised the Edexcel position following its takeover by Pearson International:

The way I see London Qualifications operating...is that BTEC is positioning itself as BTEC [and] is now deliberately strengthening the brand and separating the other activity. Now I don't think Pearson would have bought the whole thing without actually wanting this other activity, because that's what they want to get into. [The Chairman of Edexcel], on the other hand, is vocational to the core. Indeed I think [his] personal ambition was to throw off the general qualifications, sell them to somebody, and he would do what he wanted with BTEC. Now, he wasn't able to deliver that, so he's chairman of this foundation which has got largesse from other people.

(OCR2 2003)

Since that interview, the Edexcel website reports that the short-lived 'London Qualifications' title has been abandoned in favour of 'Edexcel Limited'. Its emphasis is on its international role in delivering "*our qualifications to more than two million*

learners around the world” and in addition to its established BTEC suite of qualifications, it is promoting its ‘IGCSEs’ (International General Certificate of Secondary Education). This suggests that the strategic direction Edexcel is pursuing is a reduction in its role as a mainstream provider of English general qualifications – at least at AS/A2/VCE. That level has always been subsidised by the much larger GCSE market, a fact which has not escaped Pearson Chief Executive Marjorie Scardino. She was quoted in *Education Guardian* of 17 August 2004 in a speech at a European media seminar:

The UK is highly inefficient in marking exams. They spend three times as much per student on exams as American schools do and they spend a third as much on educational materials as American schools do. So they could really use some efficiencies in marking GCSEs. Even if you didn't add technology you could do a lot better, and we think that's good potential.

A recent interview with the Pearson official now heading Edexcel confirmed this view of the English examining market. When asked why Pearson had invested in such an unprofitable enterprise as English qualifications, he replied, “*Because the system is incredibly inefficient, money can be made*” (Edexcel4 2005). Even were the Government to overcome its preference for competition and move to a single national examining body, Pearson would be undeterred because their real objective is to move into “*support processes, which will continue*” (Edexcel4 205). By support processes, they mean textbooks and materials which their detailed database of examination results enables them to produce for teachers to use in targeting their teaching to improving outcomes.

With OCR too there are signs that it may be looking beyond a role as an accredited provider of qualifications within the English state system. Following the publication of the Tomlinson Report which recommended the replacement of GCSE and A levels with a new four-level diploma structure, OCR responded by disagreeing strongly and

suggesting that “*these brands must stay*” – an opinion which they “*sent to ministers for consideration when drawing up the white paper*” (*The Guardian* 3 December 2004). This response is in line with their growing dependence on the financial stream of international qualifications: IGCSEs, A levels and above all the Cambridge ESOL certificate – the leading brand in the lucrative market of English qualifications both for Slovakian au pairs and Polish plumbers in the UK, and for aspiring English speakers around the globe.

All the evidence of Cambridge Assessment (formerly UCLES)’s behaviour shows a marked disinclination to yield control. Since providing English qualifications is now an activity where control resides elsewhere, a strong possibility is that OCR will continue to offer a dwindling repertoire of general qualifications in England and build its international business, providing ‘old’ A levels for use both the private sector in England and an international market where the ‘Cambridge brand’ has proven value.

In April 2005 OCR’s preference for moving outside the constraints of QCA-controlled qualifications was confirmed by an announcement that UCLES was working jointly with the Australian Council for Educational Research to develop an academic reasoning and thinking skills test. Ron Mc Clone, OCR’s Director General of Assessment said:

Our collaboration is a response to the [Professor Stephen] Schwartz report’s desire to minimise the burden of [higher education] admissions, whilst recognising the need to give institutions a valid and reliable instrument for achieving their selection and/or widening participation objectives.
(*The Guardian* 14 April 2005)

While the Australian Council would do well to consider the fate of Cambridge’s previous partners, this is further evidence of a desire to diversify. The scheme may be undermined by the brief statement in the White Paper of 2005 that in cases where

there is major competition for higher education places, examining boards will be able to release candidates' marks, which would facilitate the selection process. If this practice were to become widespread, however, it could have significant unintended consequences. Certainly it would obviate the market for a new selection test.

This picture leaves only AQA with no alternative direction to pursue. That organisation has no alternative qualification provision, no international market, and no financial resources except its fee income. An analogy could be made with MG Rover, whose collapse in April 2005 was inevitable, according to the analysis of De Matthias Holweg and Professor Nick Oliver. In their book *Who Killed MG Rover?* they suggest that, "*Without a strong [financial] partner, a slow death was inevitable*" (Quoted in *The Guardian*, April 27 2005). In the case of AQA, continuing to provide increasingly costly English qualifications without some form of financial support could lead to economic collapse. Such an eventuality could force the Government to save the system by effectively nationalising the Board as it quietly did, to take another analogy, when it created Southeast Trains after dismissing the French company Connex. A glance at the most recent market share statistics reveals that AQA remains to a significant degree the largest provider of general qualifications in England:

For the summer 2004 examination series these three awarding bodies produced:

5.35 million GCSE examination results (AQA 59%, Edexcel 21% and OCR 27%)

700 000 GCE A level examination results (AQA 47 %, Edexcel 26 % and OCR 27%)

959 000 GCE AS examination results (AQA 49%, Edexcel 24 % and OCR 27% (QCA 2005)

These statistics indicate that for the system to continue in anything like its present form, AQA must survive in some form or other. A second glance explains why proponents of the abolition of the GCSE have not grasped the economics of the

current system, but then the economics of it all have, as I have indicated, consistently remained outside the focus of everyone but Board finance officers. This is an area of research which is crying out for serious investigation.

Since AQA has always been, in the words of one of its competitors “a *very public service institution*” (OCR2 2003), it might adjust relatively painlessly to such a change. The other two boards could then opt in to provide the qualifications that appealed to them, while conducting their principal business in the global market.

In this scenario, then, the future shape of English qualifications providers is likely to be determined by economic rather than educational factors. However the possibility of what would be virtually a single national examining board has major implications for secondary teachers, who work within a strong culture of choice from a range of providers. Not only would they lose such choice, but innovation, already greatly reduced because of the high degree of central control, would become entirely the preserve of the regulator. Yet, as the September 2002 grades crisis proved, the regulator is not necessarily well versed in the finer points of assessment.

If this path were to be followed, I believe there would be other crises before English qualifications reach a calm plateau.

Cautiously Optimistic Scenario: Professional and political pragmatism

I base my more positive assessment of future developments on the view that the events of September 2002 demonstrated to the regulator – and to the DfES and its political masters as well – that assessment is a complex process. Whatever else the

grades crisis has done, it has demonstrated that it is foolhardy for the amateur to tamper with that process.

It was, in my view, this realisation that lay behind the government's unwillingness to endorse the wholesale changes proposed by the Tomlinson Committee in October 2004. The 2005 White Paper containing the government's response implied a continuing regard for the awarding bodies by maintaining that:

GCSEs and A levels ...will be kept as a cornerstone of 14-19 learning. They will continue to be assessed through rigorous external examinations; and they will be reformed to increase stretch and challenge and to improve progression.
(DfES 2005: 45)

This seems to me to indicate that the experience of the problems of *Curriculum 2000* provided a severe lesson in the hazards of change that has not been clearly thought through. What appear as underlying good intentions to proceed at a more deliberate pace are signalled by the promise "*to review progress in 2008*".

Once again, a major change appeared in a very understated fashion in the White Paper. This was the half-sentence which quietly stated, "*We will...support those universities who wish to have marks as well as grades...*"(DfES, 2005 #302). This simple statement, at a stroke, addressed the longstanding complaint by universities that A levels currently are proving inadequate for the increasing burden of selection. This tactic should enable a period of calm reflection so that the promised review in 2008 can proceed without at least one very vocal pressure group as an inhibiting factor.

Although to date at least one of the awarding bodies is expressing some concern at QCA's invitation that they should "*think about alternative structures*" such as fixed-price contracting deals for designing syllabuses or devising assessment schemes, (AQA3 2005), at least the signs suggest that discussions are alive and continuing with

all three Boards fully involved. This is reassuring counter-evidence to my gloomy scenario of two of them withdrawing from the field.

Were the Boards' professional expertise to be newly appreciated in these discussions, they would be fully prepared to contribute that expertise because, despite the pressures they have endured, they have managed to retain this expertise in the form of staff stability. I have not collected data to support this observation – this is yet another area that could provide useful data for subsequent research – but during the years firstly of my involvement with one Board and then of my research, I have been struck by the continuity of personnel in all three organisations. This was in marked contrast to the rapid movement I encountered, certainly at high levels of the DfES and even more strikingly into and out of QCA. One can only speculate that this is perhaps because the examining world is a very specialised sector so that the expertise staff acquire is not easily transferable. My point is that, were the present situation to be recognised as wasteful of a body of expertise, that expertise remains ready to be called on.

A small step toward a new direction could be discerned in QCA's creation in April 2004 of the National Assessment Agency (NAA). Initial alarm that it presaged nationalisation of examinations was lulled by consulting the Agency's website. It is committed to "*working closely with the awarding bodies*". Its function, which is described as "*to supervise the delivery and modernisation of GCSE and A level examinations*", in fact is confined to the technical mechanisms of the system. Perhaps this is in effect a recognition by QCA, by the DfEE and by Government, that the role of the regulator is best fulfilled by ensuring that the technical aspects of the

assessment system are in good order. This would enable the professionals to concentrate their attention on their central area of expertise.

Further positive signs can be detected in the 2005 White Paper (DfES 2005). The series of changes signalled in this document involve consultations with awarding bodies, pilots of revised qualifications and a gradual pace of change – all of which suggest that lessons have been learned as a result of the crisis of autumn 2002.

Will the examining boards be redeemed from the level of outsourcing agencies to which my research has consigned them? With each of the three examining boards having appointed a new Chief Executive since 2003, with a new Chief Executive at QCA in 2006, and with the habitual short-term tenure of DfES officials and government ministers, the slate of previous significant actors is being wiped clean. In the words of one of them, “*Much depends on who the players are; personalities count for a great deal in this dynamic situation*” (Edexcel4). In the interests of the young people whose future is so significantly shaped by the qualifications they achieve, I hope that this new group of “*players*” will proceed judiciously and take account of the English examining boards’ undoubted strengths as they attempt to address the system’s undoubted weaknesses.

Appendix: Key to Interviewees

[I have referred to Lord Dearing, autumn 2003, and Professor Peter Gosden, 2000 by name, as they were interviewed as individuals in their own right rather than as officials of a particular body.]

AEB1: AEB General Secretary (retired) (Letter), June 2004

AQA1: AQA Chief Executive, 2000

AQA2 : AQA Former Chief Executive, October 2003

AQA3: Chief Executive & Deputy, June 2005

Business Studies: Head of Business Department of 11-18 School, November 2003

City & Guilds: City & Guilds Chief Executive, 2000

DfES 1: Director of Qualifications: Lifelong Learning Directorate, DfEE, 2000

Edexcel1: Edexcel Chief Executive, 2000

Edexcel2: Edexcel Director of Policy and Qualifications, October 2003

Edexcel3: Edexcel Former Chief Executive, March 2004

Edexcel4: President Pearson Assessments & Testing, September 2005

NUT: Headteacher member of Schools Council (retired), phone interview, 2000

OCR1: OCR Former Chief Executive, 2000

OCR2: OCR Chief Executive, October 2003

QCA1: QCA Chief Executive, 2000

QCA2: QCA Deputy Director and Former Director of Qualifications, November 2003

QCA3: Former member of NCVQ Research Department then of QCA research department, January 2004

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¹ In the interests of clarity, I shall capitalise ‘Boards’ when referring to them without a modifier such as ‘examining’ or ‘English’.

² The meaning of the word ‘matriculation’ has changed along with the purposes of examinations. Originally referring to ‘enrolling at a university’, it has gradually come to mean ‘achieving the final school-leaving examination’ as it is now used, for example, in South Africa.

³ This radical step explained University College’s being known in some circles as ‘the godless institution in Gower Street’ and led to the establishing of King’s college as a means of ensuring an Anglican voice within the university. Montgomery, R. J. (1965). *Examinations: an account of their evolution as administrative devices in England*. London, Longmans.

⁴ I am indebted to Carol Dyhouse’s research for the full list of England’s nine ‘other’ universities [in addition to Oxford and Cambridge] that existed by 1939. “...With the dates of their charters, [they] were: Birmingham (1900), Bristol (1909), Durham (1832), Leeds (1904), Liverpool (1903), London (1836), Manchester (1903), Reading (1926) and Sheffield (1905).” With the exception of Reading, each was involved in an examining board. There were of course also the “University Colleges, with their dates of foundation, [which] were Exeter (1901), Hull (1926), Leicester (1922), Nottingham (1903) and Southampton (1905). (Dyhouse, 2002. Footnote 8 page 46)

⁵ Cyril Norwood had a long innings in education. As a young headmaster of a Bristol grammar school, he provided evidence to the Dyke Acland Report in 1911, and then moved to the private sector where he eventually became head of Harrow School.

⁶ The nine included the Welsh board; this study concerns only the English boards which then numbered eight.

⁷ As it happened, BTEC and its succeeding body Edexcel were to become bywords for administrative incompetence among teachers, a reputation which anecdotal evidence continues to sustain.

⁸ The Capey Review was commissioned to consider structural weaknesses in the GNVQ assessment structures and reported in 1995. A parallel investigation into NVQs was conducted in the same year and was published as the Beaumont Report. Both grew out of the perception that “the problems of the qualifications system, arising from the 1991 White Paper, were becoming apparent.” P 197, Spours, K. and M. Young (1997b). *Towards a Unified Qualifications System for Post-Compulsory Education: Barriers and Strategies. Dearing and Beyond: 14-19 Qualifications, Frameworks and Systems*. A. Hodgson and K. Spours. London, Kogan Page.

⁹ On 30 October 2005, I heard a reference to “Cambridge Assessment” in a television news broadcast. An internet search revealed that “*Cambridge Assessment is the new brand name of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), offering qualifications through three examining*

bodies: *University of Cambridge ESOL, University of Cambridge International Examinations and OCR*". The value of the 'Cambridge brand' is thus being more directly exploited.

¹⁰ At the annual JCGQ Conference in September 2000, several speakers referred to the Scottish fiasco and suggested it might well herald similar difficulties in England.

¹¹ This change in terminology, like that from 'examining boards' to 'awarding bodies', is significant. The application of discourse analysis would suggest that the choice of the word 'specification' with its flavour of building or engineering rather than abstract intellectual activity implies a shift towards criterion referenced rather than judgement-based assessment. Yet QCA officials, who initiated the change, apparently failed to realise that there might be repercussions in the pattern of results. [Chapter 4, page 163 QCA2 quote refers]